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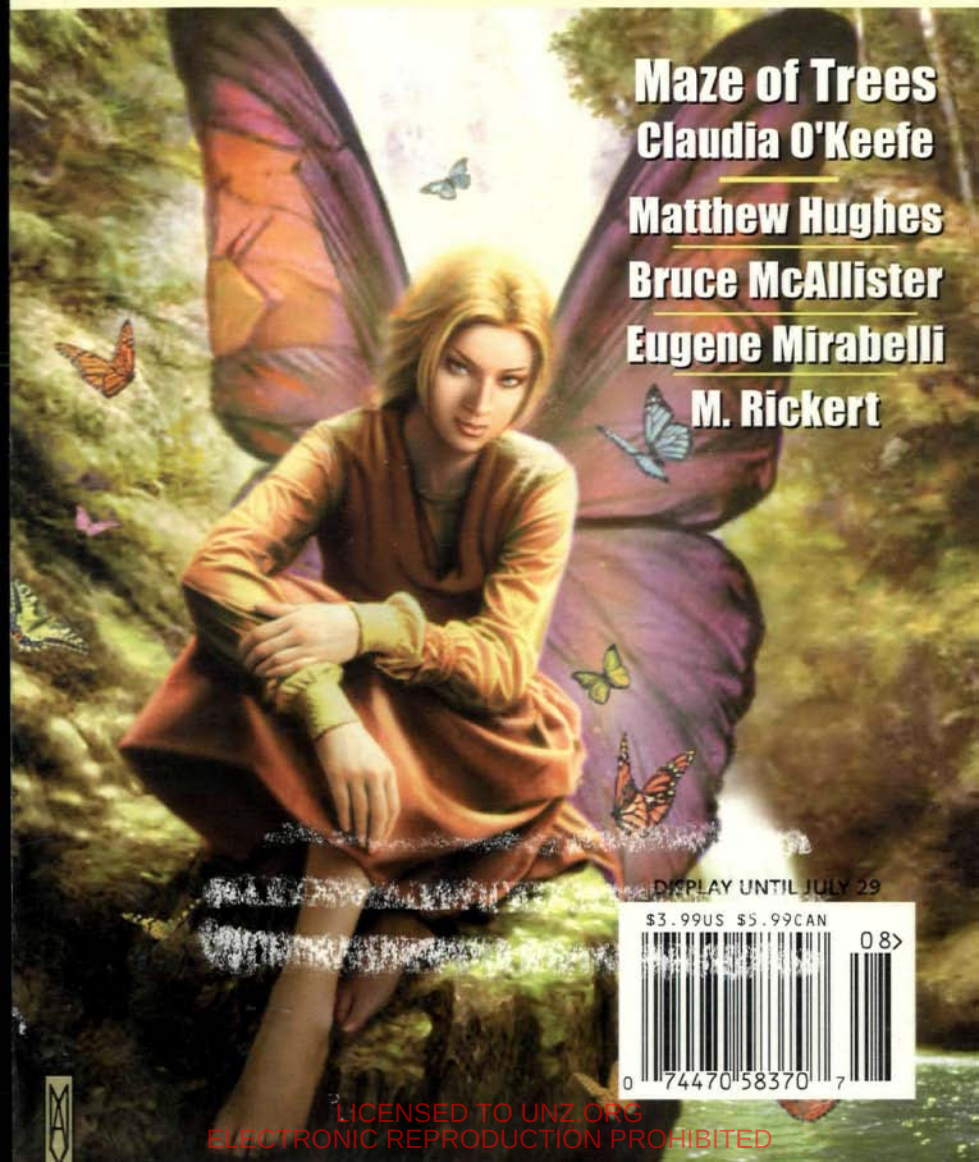

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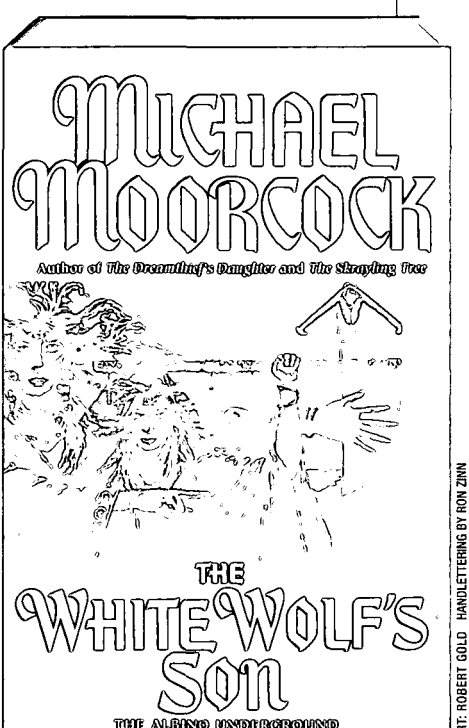
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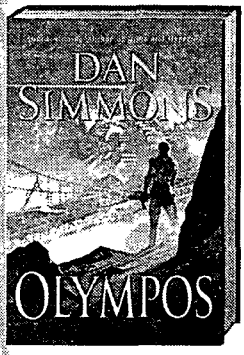

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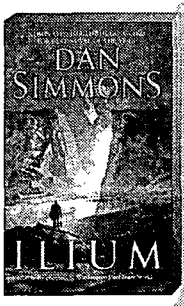

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When we published "The Gist Hunter" in our June 2005 issue, it looked as though that would be the last we'd see of Henghis Hapthorn for a while. So it was an unexpected pleasure when we received this story filling us in on Hapthorn's youth and explaining how he started on the path to becoming the foremost freelance discriminator of Old Earth.

Mr. Hughes reports from his home in British Columbia that his novel Black Brillion *is enjoying good reviews and that he is currently at work on several new writing projects, some of which we hope to bring you soon.*

Thwarting Jabbi Gloond

By Matthew Hughes

IN MY SENIOR YEAR AT THE Institute, I found a friend in Torsten Olabian, a sunny-tempered young man who shared my enthusiasm for the sport of pinking. We would regularly meet at the practice range to skim small, eight-pointed stars at wooden targets propelled in various directions by an attendant's catapult.

Olabian was skilled with either hand and it was a rare disk that did not tumble from the air pierced by one of his missiles. For my own part, I soon grew bored after mastering the throws and postures. I would have abandoned the pursuit if I had not discovered an ability to strike the targets from the air while blindfolded.

"How is it done?" Olabian wanted to know when I had just brought down my fifth disk in a row though my head was swathed in a lightless hood.

I had always found it difficult to explain how I did such things. "I call it simply insight," I said. "One just knows where target and star will meet. All that is then required is to bring the two objects together at that point and moment."

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"It sounds easy," he said.

"Indeed," I said. "I find it much easier to do than to explain. It is the same with the facility with which I resolve conundrums that others find impenetrable."

"That is a useful ability. Perhaps you should consider a career as a discriminator."

I made a noise indicative of gentle ridicule. "Henghis Hapthorn, discriminator at large," I said. "Most doubtful."

Yet even as I said it I felt a contrary vote from deeper inside me. I then confessed to Torsten what I had told no one else. "I am able to do these mental tricks with the aid of some other part of me, one that is lodged in the more remote regions of my psyche. I cannot assert control over it, though it yields remarkable results if I offer acceptance and collaboration."

"I wonder if I have such a part?" Torsten said.

"If you do, it might be best to leave it undisturbed."

My being able to hit a pinking target while blindfolded was but the latest manifestation of the odd capabilities my "other part" had demonstrated since childhood. During my adolescence I tried to understand or at least delineate the peculiarities I had discovered in myself, but my efforts met with frustration and at last I gave up.

Grown to young manhood I found myself — that is, the part of me that lived in the front parlors of my mind — no better than most of my peers at using formal logic to analyze situations and work through syllogisms to a rational conclusion. In the numeric disciplines my studies at the Institute were teaching me how to apply higher level consistencies, the recondite procedures which underlay the mathematics of chaos, and I was making adequate progress.

Yet, beyond the normal development of my intellect, there was always the sense that another person lived, for the most part unobtrusively, in the back of my mind. If I kept a problem only in my familiar front parlors I could worry at it for days and still be baffled. But if I took the conundrum down the rearmost corridors of my consciousness and left it at the edge of darkness, in time — it might be moments, or hours, but rarely more than a day — a fully formed answer would appear.

I had found that stilling my thoughts through an elementary variant

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of the Lho-tso exercises aided the process and I had become so adept at the business of what I called "applying insight" that it was now almost automatic. Faced with a puzzle that did not yield an easy or obvious solution, I need close my eyes for no more than a moment or two to know intuitively that the man down the backstairs — so I thought of him — was hard at work.

I did not resent sharing my inner spaces with this anonymous prodigy, though I had not yet come to include him in my private definition of "me." It was like having a brother who was reliable yet eccentric.

The next time we met at the practice field, Torsten had just returned from a visit to The Hutch, his father's estate near the hamlet of Binch, at the landward end of the long fingerlike peninsula that is tipped by the City of Olkney, which surrounds the Institute's hallowed grounds. My friend's normally blithe disposition was clouded and there was a grim set to the corners of his mouth.

I needed no exceptional insight to say, "Something is wrong."

He confirmed my impression. He told me that when he got to his father's house he found it had acquired an additional resident. A man had arrived one day, declared himself to be Jabbi Gloond, an old acquaintance of the master, and had moved in.

"What is the problem?" I asked.

"They do not act as if they are on good terms. Gloond struts about as if he were the proprietor, commanding, 'Bring me this,' and 'Fetch me more,' while my father remains as still as a small creature that has fallen under a predator's eye."

"What does your father say about this?"

"Nothing. He has never been the most forthcoming of parents. I've always believed it was because he was absent for the years of my infancy. We are on civil terms but not close, a relationship that has always suited us both. When I try to question him about Gloond, he makes abstracted motions with his hands and changes the subject."

"Hmmm," I said.

"Have you an insight?"

"It would be premature to say," I said. But I accepted his invitation to accompany him down to Binch at the next hiatus.

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In the meantime, I decided to assemble as much information as I could about Jabbi Gloond and Gresh Olabian, Torsten's father. Oddly enough, my friend could be of little aid in this endeavor.

"We do not talk much," he said. "The old man has always kept to himself and sometimes does not come out of his chamber for days at a time. I know that he made a small fortune on Bain, a remote planet in the Back of Beyond. He mined for gems, mainly blue-fires and shatterlights."

"And this Gloond dates from those times?"

"So it would seem."

Back in my room, I consulted the Institute's integrator. There was almost no information on Gloond; he hailed from Orkham County, a rigorously bucolic district on Bain's southern continent that had been settled centuries before by devotees of the Palmadyan Cult, who disdained all mechanical and artificial contrivances more complex than hand tools and unpowered conveyances. Whatever records Orkham Country may have kept had never been made part of the connectivity matrix that extended across Old Earth and out to all the major human settled worlds along the Spray. About all that was known about Jabbi Gloond was that he had alighted at the Olkney space port some weeks before, having worked his passage from Bain on a tramp freighter.

I then asked the Institute's integrator about Gresh Olabian and uncovered a richer vein of information. Olabian was orphaned at an early age but had overcome his handicaps; after taking a certificate in the building and operating of mines, he had gone out to the Spray to make his fortune, leaving behind an infant son. No female parent was mentioned, though that was not unusual. In such cases one did not inquire.

Gresh Olabian had worked for a number of mining consortia on various worlds, until he had acquired enough savings to undertake his own venture: a mining operation in Orkham County, delving for blue-fires and shatterlights.

The gems never occurred in surface deposits, I learned from the integrator. Because they were a temporary offshoot of vulcanism on Bain and similar worlds, they must be dug for in profound strata that were often unstable. The preferred methodology was to bore in deep and quickly, using shielded mass converters, retrieve the gems and be out before the

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disturbed rock violently rearranged itself. Yet that sort of machinery was forbidden to cross the Orkham County border.

"How did he develop the mine?" I asked.

"Olabian used ingenuity," said the integrator. "He assembled a work force from several planets: Gryulls did the digging; a trio of footed worms from Ek hauled away the broken rock, guided by their symbiotic handlers; members of a modified human species known as Halebs operated the chemical works that separated the pure blue-fires from the matrix; there was even a transmuting Shishisha to insinuate itself into the thinnest crevices, seeking out the best gems and thus avoiding unnecessary excavating."

There were, of course, no images from the Olabian diggings, but I could imagine the scene: the heavy-shouldered Gryulls punching their way deep into Bain's rocky meat, the long, armored multipedes with rocks heaped on their backs and their Ek wranglers seated just aft of the cranial sensorium, licking their fingers, then stroking the worms' feathery antennae with a unique saliva whose chemistry soothed the beasts' testy natures, the Shishisha assuming a flowing granular form that would let it fluidly slip into cracks.

It conjured up a remarkable set of mental images, made even more extraordinary when I considered the fact that none of the species Olabian had assembled were noted for leaving their home worlds. Even the Halebs preferred to remain in their own habitats, finding not enough carbon dioxide in the atmosphere of worlds hospitable to unmodified humans. The integrator could offer no explanation, only conjectures.

"They did not publicly discuss their motives; therefore there is no record in the primary sources. Perhaps Olabian was a singularly persuasive recruiter, perhaps he promised rewards that overcame his workers' homesickness, perhaps he hired those who had been banished from their home worlds, offering them shares in the venture which would have let them live large in exile.

"In any case," the integrator continued, "his plans came amiss. Shortly after the mine began production, disaster struck: a tunnel collapsed, entombing all except Olabian himself, who happened to be at the surface expediting a shipment of gems to market. He quite reasonably abandoned the venture, coming back to Old Earth with only enough profit

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to purchase a small estate. To The Hutch he brought his son, and there they dwelt quietly until the boy was sent off to school."

I then examined Olabian's history since his return to Old Earth but found nothing of note. He had become a recluse, living alone in the manor. Torsten went earlier than most boys to a residential school, though that was not in itself an uncommon circumstance. I, myself, had gained most of my education in such places, my father having declared in my seventh year that I had become insufferable — I had corrected him once too often on some trifling matter.

I applied insight to the data and felt a faint tickle at the back of my mind, but nothing concrete emerged. I decided it would be best to take a closer look at the situation that had caused Torsten to worry. In the meantime, I tasked the Institute's integrator with amassing, from secondary and tertiary sources, all the information it could glean about the events in Orkham County.

"That may take some time," it said. "Several hours at least, perhaps even days. It will require an open inquiry on a number of worlds and there is no guarantee that persons who have the information — supposing they even exist — will be inclined to respond."

"Nevertheless," I said and sent the integrator about its work.

AT TORSTEN'S URGING I took a hiatus from my studies and returned with him to The Hutch. We traveled by balloon-tram to Binch, then descended to hire an aircar that carried us to the estate. I inspected the grounds from the air as we spiraled down and saw that they were well tended, although I noticed that all work was being carried out by self-guiding devices. When we alighted at the front doors, no servant came to admit us; instead, the who's-there mounted on a pillar of the portico notified the house integrator and the doors automatically swung open.

"Where is my father?" Torsten asked as soon as we had entered. A voice from the air informed us that Gresh Olabian was sequestered in his chambers.

"Is he unwell?" my friend asked.

"He does not say. He has asked not to be disturbed."

I was intrigued. "Can you not deduce his condition from observation?" I said.

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The integrator replied, "My percepts were removed from the private chambers shortly after the master's return from the stars."

"Indeed?" I said. I could not recall encountering anyone who shut himself away from his own integrator. It was an unusual state of affairs, almost unnatural. "Did he give a reason?"

"My father is of an intensely private disposition," Torsten said. "I used to try to engage him in discussions appropriate between a son and a father, but he would soon run out of things to say and would retire to his suite."

I would have pursued the issue further, but at that moment a door to an adjacent room opened and another person entered the foyer. From the way Torsten stiffened, I knew this to be Jabbi Gloond.

He was an unprepossessing fellow, past his middle years, with a chin that descended too far toward his chest and a wandering forehead that ranged almost to the crown of his skull. Between them was a nose the shape and texture of some root vegetable. His eyes were large and moist and I suspected that his lower lip only made contact with its upper neighbor when he was speaking, being left the rest of the time to hang as loose as an untucked shirttail.

He offered Torsten a tepid greeting without stopping, and proceeded on toward the kitchens, where I heard his honking nasal voice instructing the integrator to prepare a plate of pickled mushrooms stuffed with spiced eggs.

I would admit to myself, though not to Torsten, that I had expected something else: a swaggering bravo, a coldly imperious enforcer, a sly sidler. "He does not seem the type to intimidate a master miner," I said.

"You would think so," my friend answered, "but my father clearly lost his verve on Bain. He was never quite himself again."

I was shown to a large, airy chamber on the second floor, across from Torsten's favorite room when he was at home. The elder Olabian's suite occupied one end of another wing, down a wide aisle that led off from the corridor where our accommodations were. I asked where Jabbi Gloond slept and was told that he had a small space on the ground floor where he could reach the kitchens with the fewest steps.

"He has an unending appetite for delicacies," Torsten said.

I had read that the residents of Orkham County, faithful to the

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strictures of the Palmadyan Cult, subsisted on rude fare. I was sure it was wholesome, but no doubt some found it tiresome over a lifetime.

I asked if Gloond had made any other demands. Torsten knew of none. "The fellow seems to desire no more than to sleep late in a soft bed, consume copious quantities of dainties and have his intimate needs seen to by the personal apparatus in his room."

"Palmadyans are not renowned for sophistication," I said. "For Jabbi Gloond, such a regime as he now follows may approximate paradise. He has made no demands for funds? No suggestions about redrawing a will?"

"Not so far. Comfort and opportunities for indolence seem to be his desired goals, and here he has achieved them."

I was puzzled. Jabbi Gloond seemed to be no more trouble than any house guest who slips and ducks every hint that his optimum departure date has passed. Yet Gresh Olabian was reportedly ill at ease. I closed my eyes to seek insight but received only vague impressions.

"Anything?" said Torsten, who had seen me perform before.

"Premature," I said, "though I hope you will not be offended if I speculate that Gloond causes your father discomfort because he knows something that your father would rather no one knew."

"That is an obvious line of inquiry," my friend agreed. "But when I ask the old man if there is something he wishes to tell me, he retires to his rooms without a word."

We took luncheon in the great refectory. The Hutch's integrator was a superior model and provided a fine repast. Torsten, his father and I sat at one end of the long, grand table, while Jabbi Gloond occupied the farthest extreme, trenchering his way through mounds of roast vegetables and succulent meats. A strong odor of spice and pungent herbs emanated from the loaded salvers that appeared before him and he wielded his cutlery with a clattering brio that prevented his hearing our muted conversation.

"I think we must count Jabbi Gloond a lapsed Palmadyan," I said. "The cult requires its adherents to eat only what they have grown and prepared themselves, a stricture only slightly modified by the fact that all effort in Orkham County is communal."

"Not only communal but compulsory," said Torsten. "I think you have used too mild a term for the manner in which our guest has departed

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from the cult's teachings. He has not so much lapsed from Palmadyanism as leapt from it as far as humanly possible."

Torsten and I had agreed on this conversational gambit as a means to make a sideways approach to the question on the son's mind. We would lure the father into an exchange that we intended to shape toward a discussion of how he and Gloond came to be sharing a house.

"Indeed," I said, following Torsten's observation with a question to the older man. "You have seen Orkham County at first hand. Is Jabbi Gloond as atypical as he seems?"

But Gresh Olabian gave only a wooden shrug in reply and with pale, seemingly bloodless hands continued to pick without interest at a plate of herbs and softroot.

Undeterred, I bored in. "Although you used offworld labor to mine for blue-fires and shatterlights, you must have engaged local transportation and handlers to get them to the spaceport on Shoal Island. Only horse-drawn wagons can cross Orkham County, and the drivers are all local folk. Was Gloond one of them?"

He made no reply, but this time Olabian looked at me. Although the waxy skin of his face did not register any emotion I thought I saw alarm in his otherwise expressionless eyes. My interest in Gloond appeared to disturb him.

It clearly emboldened Torsten. "If he is causing you difficulties, we'll soon tumble him out into the road," he said.

The elder Olabian said nothing and kept his eyes on his plate.

"Please, Father," said Torsten, "Henghis is very good at unraveling mysteries. I have urged him to become a professional discriminator. Whatever the problem, I'm sure he can help. We'll get to the bottom of Jabbi Gloond."

Again, though no expression animated the father's face, I sensed a growing unease. But when I began to frame a new question, Gresh Olabian rose from the table without a word and departed the room.

Torsten watched his father go, his face a turmoil of frustration mingled with heartfelt concern.

At the other end of the table Jabbi Gloond paid no heed but continued to feed his apparently unrelenting appetite.

"Hmm," I said.

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* * *

In the long summer afternoon, the old orange sun poured its tinted light through the trailing branches of a broad-boled dwindle that dominated the estate's south lawn. I had convinced Torsten that a round of pinking might take his mind off the situation. But when I came out with my stars in hand I found that my friend had prevailed, I don't know how, on Jabbi Gloond to operate the apparatus that flung the targets.

We spun our stars at the disks as they flew against the blameless sky, though my friend's mind was not upon the game. He clean missed an easy low-glide in the first frame and barely nicked a high tumbler in the second. As the fallen Palmadyan reloaded the catapult and reset its randomizer for the third interval, Torsten said, "Let us question him about his comings and doings. Perhaps he will let something slip."

I felt a stirring in the back of my mind, my other part stretching its intellectual tendons in anticipation of a pursuit. But some other region of my divided psyche made its influence felt and I said, "I am not sure there is anything to be gained by pushing into the thicket of secrets that your father and Jabbi Gloond share."

Torsten's brow darkened. "But obviously he is extorting favors from my father."

"Indeed," I said, "but they are trivial: some plates of spiced mushrooms and a narrow chamber that was intended for an undercook."

"Details! My father is victimized!"

"True, but he seems to have adjusted to the situation. He did not become disturbed until you spoke of my ability to penetrate an intrigue."

There was a sensation in my own back rooms, an inner grumble that told me that my inward companion was not pleased at the direction into which I was trying to move events. There was an even more forceful protest from the friend beside me.

"I must know what is going on," Torsten said. With that he made a peremptory gesture that caused Jabbi Gloond to slouch in our direction.

"Unpleasant knowledge is like an ugly but unreturnable gift," I quoted. "Once received it must be lived with."

Torsten struck a resolute pose. "Nevertheless."

"Very well," I said, "but allow me to put the questions."

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At close quarters, the former Palmadyan was even less prepossessing. The comprehensive traces of several meals adorning the front of his smock were as much an affront to the nose as to the eye. I examined his face and deportment for the known signs of a criminal disposition and found nothing remarkable. Nor were there indications of even moderate intelligence. Any illicit enterprise conceived by Jabbi Gloond, I decided, would be uncomplicated and its execution probably confined to a single stage. A two-step plan would be one too many.

"You are of Orkham County, I believe," I said.

"Yes."

"A remarkable place, Orkham," I said.

"Is it?" For a moment I thought to detect repartee, then I saw that the man was genuinely puzzled by my observation. While the sparse teeth of his mental gears were still grinding I threw him a direct question.

"Did you work for Gresh Olabian there?"

"No."

"Then for whom?"

"For Farmer Boher."

"What did you do for Farmer Boher?"

"Drove a wagon."

"It must have been a good and simple life, full of fresh air and healthful exercise."

He shook his elongated head so vigorously that the tip of his nose oscillated. "Food was bad, work was hard. Slept in the barn."

I understood that Jabbi Gloond had spent a lifetime doing what he was bidden to do. Asked a question, it was his reflex to answer it. Still, he was no running fount of conversation — more like a slowly dripping tap. But by patience and careful questioning I achieved an elementary view of his former situation. The Olabian diggings had been on Farmer Boher's land and Jabbi Gloond was the hand detailed to carry goods and persons to and from the mine site in the wagon. He had had only perfunctory contact with the mining party.

"Were you there when the accident happened?" I asked.

"Where?"

"At the mine?"

Now I saw craftiness mixed with apprehension blossom in his aspect,

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the sentiments as obvious as the open-pored tuber that was his facial centerpiece. "No," he said.

"You weren't there when the shaft collapsed?"

"No." Now there was patent relief in his face, telling me that I had asked the wrong question and that he was glad of it.

Insight came unbidden. "But you were there after?"

He looked away. "Don't remember."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing. Tunnel caved in. Was nothing to see."

I wanted to ask more but it now belatedly dawned on Jabbi Gloond that he was not obliged to satisfy my curiosity. He turned and sloped off toward the house.

"He was lying," Torsten said.

"Yes," I said, "but only a little."

"What do you deduce?"

I let the impression filter up from within. "Something to do with the accident. He knows something about your father's involvement. It cannot have been anything abstruse or Jabbi Gloond would have failed to notice it."

"Something as simple as my father's having caused the cave-in to rob the others of their shares?"

"Did the others have shares to be robbed of?"

"I don't know."

Gresh Olabian was clearly not the warmest of men, but I did not sense in him the coldness of spirit that would be needed if he were to murder an entire mining crew. "And if he did," I said, "why would a troublesome Jabbi Gloond still have all his particles in place? He would make a small addition to the death roll. There are plenty of corners on the estate where his ashes might be tossed into the breeze."

"We need more information," Torsten said.

I reluctantly agreed, though again I counseled him to let the matter lie. "I sense no great evil here," I said. "Nor has your father asked for my help."

"But I have," was his reply, "and as my friend you are bound to provide it."

I could think of nothing to offer in response so I said, "Let us go see if the Institute's integrator has anything to report."

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"Gresh Olabian's mining crew was a pastiche of exiles and banished criminals," the Institute's integrator reported when we used the communications nexus in The Hutch's study to make contact. It was an unimpressive room, containing only the commonest books and most of them were uncracked. The family connaissarium contained few relics or mementos, considering that Gresh Olabian had spent so many years offworld.

"The Gryulls," the integrator continued, "were from a minor sept of a warrior clan that had chosen the losing side in a voluntary prestige war involving several of the Umpteen Nations."

"I am not familiar with the Umpteen Nations," I said.

"'Umpteen' is the closest translation of the Gryull term. The next closest is 'More than anyone cares to count.' The species's numerical system only goes up to eight, that is, the equivalent of two four-fingered Gryull hands. After that come words for 'quite a few,' 'many,' and the term I translated as 'Umpteen.'"

"I take it that mathematical prowess is not prized in their culture."

"Indeed."

"Please go on," I said.

"The Gryulls were posted offworld for two cycles while they discharged their..." — again there was an untranslatable term that the integrator rendered as *second degree shame with liability for mild ridicule* — "...after which they could have returned home and resumed their careers."

"Were they close to a return?"

"They were, from a Gryull's perspective. They are far longer lived and thus generally more patient than humans."

"What about the Ek and their walking worms?" I said.

"Two of them were criminals of moderate notoriety according to their culture's norms. The other seems to have been some kind of cousin or a debt servant. Perhaps both. They fled offworld to avoid punishment."

"The Shishisha?" I asked.

The answer was vague, that species being notoriously unforthcoming about their laws and customs. "There are indirect allusions to its having assumed one of the Seven Proscribed Forms, thus making it ineligible for procreation. That's if I'm reading the term right; another interpretation is

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'ineligible for cannibalization.' Or it could be that both translations are correct — little is known of the means by which Shishisha conduct their intimacies."

"And the Halebs?"

"They seem to have been motivated primarily by the shares that Gresh Olabian offered for their participation in the project."

"Ah," I said, "so he was dividing the proceeds."

"Yes," said the integrator, "though not until the mine's decommissioning, to keep the work force together. All stood to gain substantially, at least according to their own cultural definitions of 'gain' and 'substantial.'"

"So no one had a motive to destroy the enterprise before it produced great wealth?"

"None that I can ascertain. Solitary Eks sometimes go berserk from loneliness. However, the three in this case not only had each other but, even more important to their psychological health, they had their symbiotic partners. Unattached Shishisha can give way to despair. Or at least the state is conjectured to be despair. It is characterized by inertia but no one ever knows what a Shishisha thinks or feels, if the terms are even appropriate."

"And the cause of the shaft's collapse?"

"The region is volcanic and unstable," said the integrator, displaying a map of Orkham County marked with faults and magma chambers. "Since the disaster there have been a number of serious upheavals in the same area."

"Are there images?" I asked but was not surprised to be told there were none. The integrator reproduced the texts of official reports on the incident and the results of a more recent geological survey of the area. A footnote mentioned the old mine cave-in.

I felt a stirring in the back of my mind. A picture appeared on my inner screen and after I had considered it for a few moments I told Torsten, "I believe that all this may soon take on a recognizable shape."

I have never been an aficionado of those tales where some fellow with more intellect than personality wields logic like a lancet to slice through layers of subterfuge and diversion to discover the pulsing truth. As a young

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man, however, I was familiar with the tropes. One of the standard ploys was for the discriminator to announce to the assembled suspects that the mystery had been solved and all would now be revealed. Invariably, this declaration led to the lights going out while the villain took flight or, more usually, attempted to murder the sleuth before his guilt could be uncovered.

My reading of the situation at The Hutch was that such a declaration would signal to Jabbi Gloond that his days of easy living were about to find their sunset. He would then depart — I judged him not to be the type that would opt for violent tactics — and life among the Olabians would return to its previous indifferent tranquillity.

Accordingly, when we regathered in the refectory for dinner, between the soup and the ragout I flourished a copy of the printed information the Institute's integrator had provided me and said, "The puzzle is now solved. I have studied the reports from Orkham County and I know what happened."

I then turned a withering stare on Jabbi Gloond. Unfortunately, his attention had been consumed by his efforts to scrape the last drops of broth from his bowl and over the noise of his spoon he had not heard what I had said. I called his name and when his moist eyes rotated in my direction, I repeated my statement.

I watched his reaction carefully and saw a succession of moods flutter across the long dullness of his face: first came puzzlement, then cogitation as he worked at what I had said, followed by the dawn of realization as he grasped its import, and finally a mask of sad resignation, accompanied by a slump of his bony shoulders.

"There are just a few more facts to be added, details of legalisms and entitlements," I said, embroidering the fabric of my falsehood to heighten the effect on Jabbi Gloond. "I shall have them in the morning. Then we will settle matters once and for all."

Gloond's shoulders fell further. I looked across the table at Torsten's triumphant smile. The son turned to the unwanted guest and said, "Depart by any door you choose, or face the consequences."

Gresh Olabian, meanwhile, said nothing, nor did his expression change. His eyes remained on his plate and his pallid fingers rested immobile beside it. I examined him closely and confirmed my earlier intuition. I believed I knew what had happened on Bain.

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The lights did not go out. Instead we were served five-flesh stew. Torsten ate his with more gusto than Jabbi Gloond. It was the happiest I ever saw my friend. His father sipped a few morsels from a spoon and when he thought I was not looking regarded me with a brief, expressionless stare.

I turned and offered him a reassuring smile. He would not meet my eyes but looked down again at his plate.

After dinner, Torsten and I played pick-and-ponder in the study while the two other inhabitants of The Hutch went to their chambers. Over a smoky liqueur Torsten asked me, "Do you really know all?"

"I believe so."

"Then tell me."

"It would be premature...," I began, but he cut me off, demanding that I disclose what I knew.

I demurred. "I only suspect," I said. "And if in the morning, Jabbi Gloond is gone, then you will have the result you sought. The Hutch will again become as you have always known it and you can let matters lie."

"I cannot believe that my father did anything discreditable."

"That is an appropriate attitude for a good son who has a good father. I believe the situation on Bain was unique and involved desperate circumstances. It need not be spoken of."

"But what about the secret?"

"Obviously it is something your father does not wish anyone to know. I believe that 'anyone' includes you, perhaps especially you."

"But *you* know it."

"Until it is confirmed, I merely suspect," I said again. "And if in the morning Jabbi Gloond is gone, I will rise and depart in his wake without speaking of it. Then all of this can be forgotten."

Late in the evening we retired. Although I still did not suspect the worst of Jabbi Gloond I locked my chamber door and set a chair against the opener. I left a small lumen aglow on a nightstand and got into bed. I turned the facts and my conclusions over in my head one last time, then turned myself over and fell asleep.

I came awake in complete darkness. I lay without moving, breathing as quietly as I could through my open mouth, listening. Something had

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awakened me but now the room was without noise. The silence extended, second after second, while I heard only my own pulse throbbing in my ears.

Then there came a whisper, nearby and off to my right, the faintest sound of a soft sole touching carpet. Silently I pushed back the covers, rolled across the bed to the night table on my left and reached through the blackness for the pinking stars I had left there after my game with Torsten. Applying insight, I spun a star as I would when blindfolded. I heard it strike home, a meaty thunk followed by a hiss. Then came sounds of motion receding.

I leapt from the bed and felt for the nightstand. When I activated the lumen, its glow revealed that I was alone in the chamber, with furniture still set against the latch. I threw the chair aside, unlocked the door and stepped out into the corridor to find it empty. A moment later, a tousled Torsten appeared in sleeping attire from his quarters, rubbing his eyes and inquiring what was the matter.

I told him that there was nothing that need concern him. His eyes dropped to a spot just inside the door to my room. There lay a pinking star, one of its points glistening with dark liquid.

"Gloond!" Torsten said and flung himself in the direction of the stairs.

"No!" I called after him but he paid no heed. I could only follow.

Gloond's cubby beside the kitchens was empty, the bed unslept in.

"Integrator," Torsten called. "Where is Jabbi Gloond?"

"Gone," came the answer. "He packed and caught the last jitney to Binch."

"No," said Torsten. "His departure is a ruse and he has returned to do us ill. Even now he may be entering my father's rooms with foul intent."

I put my hand on his arm and shook him gently. "How could Jabbi Gloond contrive to enter my locked room then, having sustained an injury, escape in seconds through the still barricaded door?"

Torsten tore himself away. "I do not know." He spoke to the integrator. "Where is my father?"

"In his chambers, I believe."

"I must see that he is all right," Torsten said.

"No, leave him," I said. "All will be well."

But again he paid me no heed and reluctantly I followed him to the end

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of the corridor in the far wing. He touched the door control and when it would not open, he ordered the integrator to override the mechanism.

The door slid aside and Torsten strode through the sitting room to his father's private bedchamber. He called for every lumen to be activated, and the sudden flood of brightness chased all shadows from the room.

The great bed occupied the center of the space, and its center was occupied by a motionless, amorphous shape beneath the bedding. "Father!" Torsten cried, and before I could stop him he pulled back the covers.

Gresh Olabian's face was expressionless. His blank eyes looked up at us and then he slowly blinked. But our gazes were drawn first to the center of the pale forehead where, like a third eye, a deep puncture was slowly filling itself in, and then to what lay where his body should have been.

"I wish I had never brought you," Torsten said.

"I understand," I said. "I did try to keep you from discovering what I suspected had happened on Bain."

"You should have tried harder."

We were seated in the study. The geological survey notes were spread across a table. They told how less than a year ago another volcanic upheaval had rearranged the rocks into which the Olabian mine had burrowed. A deep crack now led down to where the mining party had been trapped. The footnote reported that someone had been sent down to place the ceremonial objects with which Palmadyans marked informal graves. I was certain that someone had been Jabbi Gloond.

He would have seen the unmistakable evidence of what had happened years before. Most of the miners had suffered death or near-fatal crushing injuries in the first moments of the cave-in. But a small space had remained, enough for the badly hurt Gresh Olabian and the only other member of his party left alive.

Jabbi Gloond's slow mind would have been longer coming to an understanding of what had happened after the cave-in than the instant leap accomplished the night before by that other Henghis Hapthorn who shared my mind. But eventually the Palmadyan would work it out. Then he would see in the secret that had been hidden below ground an opportunity to live the life he had come to crave once he had tasted — no doubt surreptitiously — the exotic foods that he hauled to Gresh Olabian's

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mining camp from the spaceport. He had worked his way back to Old Earth, scrubbing decks and latrines on a third-rate freighter, dreaming of an unending feast of spiced eggs and pickled mushrooms.

I looked at the geological survey notes and again I could envision Gresh Olabian and the other survivor making their agreement. Olabian was dying. He was desperate not to leave his infant son orphaned as he had been orphaned. So he transferred to the other all rights in the venture's earnings and the information needed to exercise them. In return, the surviving partner would see that Torsten would have a home and a father to give him a secure upbringing. The pact sealed, the other waited for Olabian to die, then it performed a necessary act upon the dead man's body before slipping through cracks and fissures, none of them thicker than a man's thumb, to reach the surface.

There the Shishisha assumed Gresh Olabian's likeness, wearing clothes from the mining man's tent as well as what it had brought up with it from the collapsed tunnel. When Jabbi Gloond came with the wagon, the facsimile of Gresh Olabian rode it to the spaceport and departed Bain.

Now the study door opened and the entity Torsten Olabian had called father for most of his life came into the room. The wound in Gresh Olabian's forehead was almost completely healed; the interaction between the Shishisha's fluid surface and the skin it had long ago flensed from Gresh Olabian's head and hands aided rapid recovery. I suspected that by now it had so integrated with the alien flesh that it could not remove them.

Torsten looked at the Shishisha and said, "No need to continue the pretense. You may resume your own shape."

"No," said the Shishisha, in its dry, whispery voice, "I am true to the agreement."

I said, "You need not have worried about me. I would never have revealed the secret. I only said what I did to make Jabbi Gloond flee, since his knowledge of your true identity was his only hold on you."

The Shishisha inclined Gresh Olabian's head. I took it as an apology and let it know that I harbored no ill will. I would not mention to the Bureau of Scrutiny that the creature's faithfulness to its pact with Gresh Olabian had led it to slither under the door of my chamber with the aim of silencing me forever.

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"Still," Torsten said, "I think you had better go, Henghis."

I knew from the tone of his voice that our friendship would not survive the revelation I had been instrumental in bringing about. It mattered not that I had done so unwillingly and only at his urging. He had lost his father. The fact that it had happened many years ago on a far distant world signified nothing.

I gathered my belongings but left the pinking stars behind. I would not play again. I waited with Torsten at the gate for the hired air-car, and when it arrived, our leave-taking was formal.

Not long after my return to the Institute I learned that Torsten would not be rejoining its cloisters. He had gone offworld, leaving The Hutch to its solitary inhabitant's sad exile. I was surprised to note that the message that brought news of his departure was accompanied by a substantial sum.

I hope that you will not let the results of our unhappy association deter you from work for which you have an unsurpassed talent, it said, *and that you will use these funds to set up as a discriminator. I believe the one with whom you share an intellect would enjoy that.*

I cleared my mind so I could put the question to the inhabitant of its darker passages. I received an immediate and fierce affirmation. I fought down a resentment of the other's joy at a circumstance that had cost me a rare friendship.

Torsten's plan was as good as any other. I wound up my studies at the Institute. With Olabian's funds I secured a suitable workroom with adjacent living quarters and purchased the components of a high-functioning integrator that would serve as an appropriate research assistant to a freelance discriminator.

I hoped that this life would at least offer some interesting challenges, though I suspected that it would be a lonely affair. Friends would be few, most evenings would be spent with none but my integrator for company. As I dwelt poignantly on these prospects my other self gave the mental equivalent of an insouciant shrug.

For a moment I wondered whose life I was living. Then I put aside the incertitude as the product of vain regret and began to assemble my research assistant.

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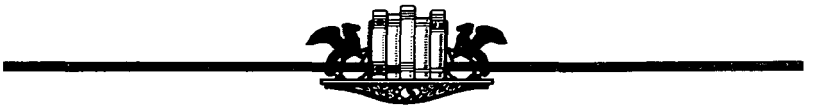

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Enchanted, Inc., by Shanna Swendson, Ballantine Books, 2005, $12.95.

THE THING about fantasy novels — the majority of all novels, really — is that our main viewpoint character is usually extraordinary. And if they don't appear to be so when we start the book, by the time it ends, our hero or heroine turns out to be some mighty mage, or the warrior princess of prophecy, or some other high-falutin' savior of the world.

That's not particularly surprising, I suppose. We read books for a vicarious peek into lives that aren't as mundane as our own usually are, so we're not as quickly attracted to a novel about some ordinary person (unless we're led to understand they're going to become *more* during the course of the story).

So it's refreshing to read a book like Shanna Swendson's *Enchanted, Inc.* in which our heroine Katie Chandler is as ordinary as they come.

And stays that way. Sort of. But more on that later.

She's from Texas originally, sharing a one-bedroom apartment in New York City with three college friends from her home town. She doesn't really fit in — not on the dating scene, not at work where she has the boss from hell, not really anywhere but back home. Except this is her one chance at being something more than she could be in small-town Texas. This is her big opportunity, if only someone would take a chance on her.

Well, it turns out that Katie is *so* ordinary that there is someone who is not only willing, but eager, to take a chance on her. And that would be the folks at M.S.I., Inc. (Magic, Spells, and Illusions, Inc.), a curious company that is desperate for the services of an ordinary person. Because it turns out magic is real, but hidden from most of the world. Spells work. As do illusions.

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But for a company to see through the enchantments that might be hidden in a contract, for instance, or to keep watch for invisible corporate thieves, they need that rarest of beings: an immune.

As Katie explains to another immune who's being offered a job: "I'm as nonmagical as you can get, to the point that magic doesn't work on me. And you're the same way. That's why you see the things you do. Most people have just enough magic in them to be influenced by it. They don't see weird things because the magical people have ways of masking them so they look normal. But we don't see the illusions. We see the truth. So we see the wings and ears and the results of spells."

In other words, they're invaluable to a company that deals in magic, and with other magical beings.

Now what I liked most about *Enchanted, Inc.* is that Katie stays an immune, right through to the end. She doesn't suddenly develop hidden latent magical abilities, or turn out to be the long-lost daughter of the company's CEO, or any such thing. She's simply an immune, with a down-to-earth attitude and common sense.

But that doesn't make her uninteresting — no more than anyone really is, once you start to learn their story. And she does have a touch of the extraordinary — again, just as we all do — because she's willing to stand up for herself, because she's brave (even when she's scared), and she's willing to roll up the figurative sleeves to work through a problem, rather than wait for some magical solution.

I liked her, and I think other readers will, too. I enjoyed watching how she coped both with her new job, and with how that job impacted on the mundane aspects of her life. If I had any disappointment, it's that Swendson lays all sorts of hints to romantic entanglements, but never follows through on them. Maybe that'll come in another book. Or maybe it's just like life, where romance simply doesn't always work out.

Swendson's style is light and breezy, but not without substance. It has a bit of the sense of a screwball comedy, only updated for these times that we live in. For touchstones, think of Thorne Smith's delightful books, or Jack Williamson's early fantasies, with a hint of *Sex in the City*, and maybe a dash of Bridget Jones.

But with that said, Katie Chandler is still very much her own woman, with her own voice. And if she's ordinary, then we should all be so ordinary.

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Casa Azul: An Encounter with Frida Kahlo, by Laban Carrick Hill, Watson-Guptill, 2005, $15.95.

A few months ago we had a look at *The Spirit Catchers*, the first book in Watson-Guptill's new Young Adult series "Art Encounters," featuring fictional encounters with famous artists. *The Spirit Catchers* was set during the Depression in New Mexico and featured a young man and told how he both influenced, and was influenced by, Georgia O'Keeffe. It was a wonderful book, mixing history, mythical desert spirits, and an absorbing exploration into the heart of the creative impulse. Although marketed as a YA book, it was one of those all-ages books that appeal to everyone, not simply the young at heart.

I had high hopes for the second book in the series since it would be focusing on a couple of my favorite things: the art of Frida Kahlo and Mexican culture. Mostly, it succeeds, but I do have a couple of caveats that I'll get to in a moment.

But let me start with the set-up. The plot switches between two storylines. First up we meet Maria and Victor Ortiz, fourteen and eight, respectively. Upon the death of their grandmother, they leave their small village to go by bus to Mexico City, where they hope to find their mother. To keep Victor occupied on the trip and once they're in Mexico City, Maria continues an ongoing story, her own version of a meeting between two famous wrestlers, El Corazón and El Diablo.

Once in Mexico City they run into a street urchin named Oswald and things go rapidly downhill from there.

The other storyline features Frida and her husband Diego Rivera, beginning on the day of their divorce. Anyone familiar with their history will know that their love-hate relationship continued for long after that.

It's in the Frida sections that Hill brings to play the magical realism one associates with Latin literature. Frida's home, Casa Azul, is a sanctuary for the lost and lonely, a place where those with no voice can have one. Literally. So the characters in this section range from monkeys and a cat to figures from paintings and a Day of the Dead sugar skull.

The two plots collide, naturally, but I won't go into how. Hill is a fine writer with an inventive sense of humor and imagination, though she can also be serious. There's a good biographical section and timeline of Frida's life, and of

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course the cover bears a reproduction of one of her gorgeous paintings, *Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*.

But the problem with the book is that it has a very young feel to it. Whereas I would happily recommend *The Spirit Catchers* to readers of any age, *Casa Azul* won't be fully absorbing for anyone much older than our fourteen-year-old heroine Maria.

This isn't the worst thing in the world, of course. Because it's such a good book for what it is, I can heartily recommend you give a copy to your favorite younger reader. It's a terrific introduction to magical fantasy and the creative impulse, with the added bonus of being set in a different cultural milieu than the usual Tolkienesque fantasy.

Spectrum 11: The Best in Contemporary Fantasy Art, edited by Cathy & Arnie Fenner, Underwood Books, 2004, $29.

I love the *Spectrum* series of the year's best art. If you're not a big convention goer (I'm not), and can't afford to keep up on all the books and magazines that come out in a year (I can't), it's a great way to stay familiar with the best artists our field has to offer.

There are text features. This volume contains a short essay on 2004's Grand Master winner Michael Whelan, and a longer essay by Arnie Fenner that is certainly informative. But really, the reason to buy this is for the art. Page after page of sumptuous art, printed on thick glossy stock, and covering everything from old-fashioned Maxfield Parrish-styled artists such as Richard Hescox and Raoul Vitale, to the pure sf illustration of someone like Stephan Martiniere, with every other style you can imagine in between.

Some of the work is previously unpublished, but most of it is drawn from contemporary dustjackets, advertising, statues, comics, and whatever else our field has to offer that utilizes illustration.

While the series is certainly a valuable reference tool for editors, art directors, and the like (not simply for the samples of art, but also for the contact information at the back of the book), it offers pure visual pleasure to the rest of us. And this year's edition is no exception.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Lord Byron's Novel: The Evening Land, by John Crowley, Morrow, 2005, $25.95.

The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines, by John Crowley, Subterranean Press, 2005, $35.

The Happy Place, Boston Review, October/November 2004, *http://www.bostonreview.net/BR29.5/crowley.html.*

Pogo, vols. 1–11 by Walt Kelly, Fantagraphics Books, $9.95 each (paper).

"Evening will find itself"

JOHN Crowley has long had my vote as the best American fiction writer of our time. His latest book, the intricate and enthralling *Lord Byron's Novel: The Evening Land*, is a palimpsest within a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma: the recreation of a lost novel, attributed to Lord Byron, discovered in the form of ciphered pages among the effects of Byron's daughter, Ada Lovelace, and with handwritten annotations by Ada. The ciphered text is then decoded, detailed, and discussed in epistolary mode by a small group of contemporary researchers; the group includes an estranged father and daughter whose relationship mirrors that between the historical Byron and Ada, as well as reflecting the relationship between the fictional characters in the newfound book, a novel of sensation titled *The Evening Land*.

Byron, of course, never wrote a novel. But he was present at what might be considered the Big Bang of genre literature, when, during the rainy summer of 1816, Byron, Percy and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Claire Clairmont (Mary's stepsister, impregnated that summer with Byron's child), Matthew "Monk" Lewis, and Byron's doctor, John

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Polidori, all spent time together at a Lake Geneva villa, reading *Fantasmagoriana, ou Recueil d'Histoires d'Apparitions de Spectres, Revenants, Fantomes, etc.; traduit de l'allemand, par un Amateur* (1812), a collection of German folktales translated into French (published in English as *Tales of the Dead* [1812]).

Lewis's wildly popular novel *The Monk* had appeared two decades earlier, influenced by the work of Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe. So the fictional ground had already been well-tilled when Byron made his famous pronouncement (probably on June 16, according to Richard Davenport-Hines in his wide-ranging study *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin*), "We will each write a ghost story." Mary Shelley subsequently produced *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). Her husband wrote "Alastor or the Spirit of Solitude" (1816) and later the visionary "The Witch of Atlas" (1820). The competitive and truculent Polidori, who appears to have played Salieri to Byron's Mozart, wrote something involving incest; but the physician's more lasting contribution to history's most fruitful ghost story contest was first published in 1819 as "The Vampyre, A Tale by Lord Byron." Polidori claimed to be outraged by the assumption that the story was written by his illustrious former employer, as well as the prevalent belief that the idea was cribbed from a story recounted by Byron at the Villa Diodati that fateful summer. Polidori did not, however, repudiate the fact that his fictional vampire, Lord Ruthven, was based on Lord Byron himself. This was not the first time Byron was fictionalized by a peeved acquaintance: his former lover Lady Caroline Lamb made him the eponymous protagonist of her own novel of sensation, *Glenarvon* (1816).

Yet where among all these literary fireworks is Byron's own contribution? A faint contrail remains in what is known as the Darvell Fragment, dated June 17, 1816. The fragment is reminiscent of the macabre tales in Count Jan Potocki's Saragasso Manuscript, *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, published in various parts beginning in 1804. Byron's very brief account of an aborted journey to Ephesus lacks the nightmarish clarity and frank ghoulishness of Potocki's work; it's at once tepid and overwrought, and brought to its unsavory, unsatisfactory conclusion by the untimely demise of Augustus Darvell.

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"He smiled in a ghastly manner, and said faintly, 'It is not yet time!' As he spoke, the stork flew away. My eyes followed it for a moment — it could hardly be longer than ten might be counted. I felt Darvell's weight, as it were, increase upon my shoulder, and, turning to look upon his face, perceived that he was dead!

"...Between astonishment and grief, I was tearless."

Thus ends Darvell and his Fragment, with neither a whimper nor a bang but merely a tearless thud. I hope Byron's ghost, unquiet or otherwise, takes no offense at my belief that *The Evening Land*, Crowley's version of the novel Byron *might* have written, is a better book than the one Byron *would* have written. *The Evening Land*, while not precisely tongue in cheek, draws deeply from the fizzing, spurting, bubbling, babbling, full-to-overflowing well of early eighteenth century popular literature. Crowley lets Byron's daughter Ada date the provenance of the book —

I believe the MS. of this tale to have been worked on, in desultory fashion, from the time of Lord Byron's residence in Switzerland following the separation from Lady Byron until some time during his residence in Ravenna, and to have been lost (or abstracted) during the move thence. But all this is speculation.

Byron separated from Lady Byron (Ada's mother) in April 1816 and left England for good, proceeding to Geneva and the Villa Diodati; he then removed to Ravenna late in 1819. So *The Evening Land* would be the novel he should have written in response to his own challenge, *we will each write a ghost story*.

What is surprising, then, is that there are no ghosts in *The Evening Land*; nor vampires, succubi, demons or, seemingly, any overtly supernatural element — save for the hint of a far-ranging secret society introduced at the very end of the novel-within-the-novel. There are, however, assorted zombies, somnambulists, doppelgängers, bears, abductions, rescues, ill-starred loves, and even a prerequisite nod toward sibling incest. The plot, if such a wild gallimaufry of incident and characters can be called a plot, revolves around Ali, a young

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man of unusual parentage, who, very early in *The Evening Land*,

> finds, some three feet in the air, a form like a man's — face black, eyes starting from their sockets as they stare upon him, black tongue thrust out as in mockery. The strong rope from which this form depends is strung from the upper floor's stone brackets, and winds about him like a spider's thread. It is no devil from hell, caught in his own toils — and yet, it is all we know of such in this our earthly life — and his name is Legion. The man in the ropes is 'Satan' Porteous, Ali's father, Lord Sane, DEAD!

Well, *that* would certainly have gotten everyone's attention back in the Villa Diodati. *The Evening Land* relies so heavily, if hoarily (and with obvious intent), upon the lurid tropes and twists of popular entertainments of the olden time — gothic, romantic, picaresque, sensational — that it would be unfair to reveal much of its plot. Which, in any case, is meticulously braided with the two other narrative strands; the text of *The Evening Land* is alternated with these throughout.

The first of these revolves around Alexandra Novak, known as Smith, a young American affiliated with *www.strongwomanstory.org*, a U.S.-based "online virtual museum of women of science." Smith has gone to London to research the letters and papers of Ada Byron King, Countess of Lovelace, Byron's daughter. Ada (1815-1852) never met her father; a mathematical prodigy, she designed a flying machine when she was thirteen and four years later met Charles Babbage, inventor of the Difference Engine, with whom she had a lifelong friendship. (It was a tragically short life — Ada died at thirty-seven of cervical cancer.) The Difference Engine was still incomplete when Babbage began developing an Analytical Engine in 1834. In 1842 an Italian mathematician wrote a book about the Analytical Engine, in French, and Babbage encouraged Ada to translate it into English. She did, adding notes of her own that showed a remarkable grasp of the possibilities inherent in, as she put it, "the material expression of any indefinite function of any degree of generality and complexity."

Ada has become a modern heroine for women mathematicians and scientists, though Smith seems only vaguely familiar with her history when she touches down in London

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to research Ada for strongwoman-story. Smith's English host is Georgiana, a well-heeled collector who is interested in underwriting the website. The day after Smith's arrival, Georgiana is contacted by a mysterious man who claims to have some papers belonging to Ada Lovelace. Smith accompanies Georgiana to a meeting with the mysterious owner of the papers (I recognized him immediately, though this in no way detracted from the pleasures of the story yet to come; besides which I suspect he has more than one Secret Identity). He reveals a sea chest, surely the most useful deployment of a valise since Jack Worthing's arrival at Victoria Station in a black handbag. The sea chest contains

> seaman's papers and some letters that proved the trunk belonged to Lord Ockham, Byron's grandson. Some other papers in a folder tied up with ribbon. And a huge pile of other papers, not in a folder but wrapped up in a kind of shiny or greasy heavy paper; he took them out and opened the wrapping, and it was — well I don't know what. Somebody had taken a bunch of sheets printed with numbered lines, and filled in other numbers on the printed lines. Hundreds of pages. Beautiful old handwritten numbers. They looked like forms filled out, or test papers, or accounts of some kind. So many.

Georgiana agrees to buy the chest and its contents. The mysterious man is not seen again (or is he?).

This story is recounted through a series of e-mails and letters that flow between Smith and various correspondents, including Thea, Smith's mathematician lover back in the States; and Lee, Smith's father, from whom she has been long estranged, a former Byron scholar and now a well-respected documentary filmmaker and human rights advocate. Smith immediately enlists Thea into the cause of deciphering the numbered pages, which turn out — surprise! — to be the text of a novel called *The Evening Land*. Lee conveniently offers his own exegesis of both the text and of events in Byron's life, which are mirrored in the newly discovered book.

Crowley makes clever use of this string of coincidences in the present-day narrative, which reflect the over-the-top plotting in Byron's imaginary novel. The explanation

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and illustration of the cipher-breaking will no doubt enthrall many readers but exhausted this reviewer, who is Not Good with Numbers but was very impressed that Crowley is. Most intriguing is the third narrative strand, which is in the form of Ada's annotation of her father's novel — a brilliant take on Ada's work with Babbage on the Analytical Engine. Ada's notes for each chapter are initially straightforward, drawing on biographical and historical material, and filling in the blanks for contemporary readers unfamiliar with Byron and his circle while also presenting wide-ranging and fascinating tidbits of early nineteenth century arcana.

But as *The Evening Land* progresses, Ada begins to grow more debilitated with the cancer that will kill her, and her reliance on opium begins to produce more fragmentary, hallucinatory notes that take on an increasingly visionary hue, hinting at the story beneath the story beneath the story in Crowley's novel.

> What then *is* Time? Is its course but one way? Or is it like a swift stream, that rolls some things along faster & some slower, leaves, sticks and stones, which may change places, and pass each other by, collide, and combine, even as all are borne along? I sometimes think that we lead many lives between birth and dying, and only one, or perhaps two, are ever known to us consciously; the others pass in parallel, invisible, or they run backward while the one we busy ourselves with runs forward. There is no expressing this in words; only in dreams or in the power of certain stimulants is it possible to experience them — the state where two things can, after all, occupy the same space.

Lord Byron's Novel: The Evening Land is a book that should, and I hope will, be read by many people, more than once. It certainly expands, algorithmically, to accommodate various readings. On the simplest level, it can be seen as a sort of *Da Vinci Code* for smart people. For Byron fans, and fans of Romantic or Gothic literature in general, it offers the pleasure of an extended riff on antiheroes mad, bad, and dangerous to know. Friends or enemies of postmodern theory will be entertained by the e-mail exchanges between Smith and her various correspondents, as well as

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by the correspondences between these people and their counterparts in *The Evening Land* and Byron's circle. Women heartened by the portrayal of Ada Lovelace may wish to carry copies of Crowley's book to the next Conference on Diversifying the Science and Engineering Workplace, where they can shake them in Lawrence Summers's face.

But I think that, at heart, this is a book about Time; one of the recurring themes (along with the anxieties and ecstasies of literary influence), if not *the* great recurring theme, in Crowley's fiction — which includes several variations on the subject, in particular "Great Work of Time," one of the finest time-travel stories ever written; and the Ægypt sequence. Not just historical Time, but cosmological Time, the Time Ada dreams of in her laudanum visions; a Time which may be populated with Beings we can only glimpse fleetingly through the scrim of our own time. Byron apparently sometimes thought of himself as one of these. In his biography of Byron, Andre Maurois refers to an incident referred to in the journal kept by Annabella, Lady Byron (Ada's mother); "He used to declare, for instance, that he was a fallen angel, not symbolically but literally, and told Annabella that she was one of those women spoken of in the Bible who are loved by an exile from Heaven."

And then there is the title *The Evening Land*. Both the historical Byron and his avatars in Crowley's book — one of whom bears the name Aengus, a la Yeats's Wandering Aengus, the immortal Angus Og who traveled East of the Sun and West of the Moon to Tir na nOg, the Land of Youth — are in love with the idea of America, the land to the West across the sea; the Evening Land. "There is always a West," Beau Brachman muses in Crowley's *Dæmonomania*. And in *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom, perhaps Crowley's most illustrious fan, writes,

> The central fact about America, according to the poet Charles Olson, is space, but Olson wrote that as the opening sentence of a book on Melville and thus on the nineteenth century. At the close of the twentieth century, our central fact is time, for the evening land is now in the West's evening time. Would one call the list of survivors of a three-thousand-year-old cosmological war a fetish?

Who are the survivors of that

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war? At least one of them appears to wander through *Lord Byron's Novel*, and he has not given up on revolution for the hell of it. Wandering would seem to be what he does, not just in Byron's time but also in Alexandra Novak's, when he heads into the sunset. "Allbright he falls, proud lightning of the intellect," James Joyce says in *Ulysses;* "Lucifer, *dico, qui nescit occasum.** No. My cockle hat and staff and hismy sandal shoon. Where? To evening lands. Evening will find itself."

There is always a West.

"The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines" first appeared in 2002 in *Conjunctions: 39: The New Wave Fabulists*, a special issue guest-edited by Peter Straub along with the literary magazine's fulltime editor, Bradford Morrow. The novella contains no overt supernatural or fantastic element, though it does serve as a cautionary tale about the dangers of total immersion into the dark waters of Shakespearean scholarship. Crowley's haunting tale touches upon numerous subjects that are hallmarks of his work: the theater, Shakespeare, the first stirrings of Eros; the malleability of both literary texts and enduring love. The first-person account follows a young man and Harriet, a self-proclaimed "free spirit," who one summer in the late 1950s become involved in a midwestern Shakespeare Festival. Anyone who's ever fallen in love with the theater, or Shakespeare, or summer camp for that matter, will recognize the sunlit floating world that Crowley describes, with its romantic entanglements, slightly sinister director, and the breathless adolescent avidity of the narrator set loose in this summer Eden. A serpent is loosed in the garden, however, when a distinguished visitor to the festival introduces the narrator and Harriet to the theories of the Baconians, who believe that Shakespeare's plays were in fact written by Francis Bacon. The story takes a bleak turn, and ends on a note that some readers may find both unresolved and unusually dark for this most lyrical of writers; though not too dark for anyone who reads Crowley's *Little, Big* as a sustained recessional.

The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines has now been published in

*As best I can translate this, it means "Tell me, who unknown falls into the west." "Occasum" is a pun, as it means "to fall" but also can imply the place where a heavenly body sets, i.e., the west. When phrased as a question the answer, of course, is Lucifer, the morning star.

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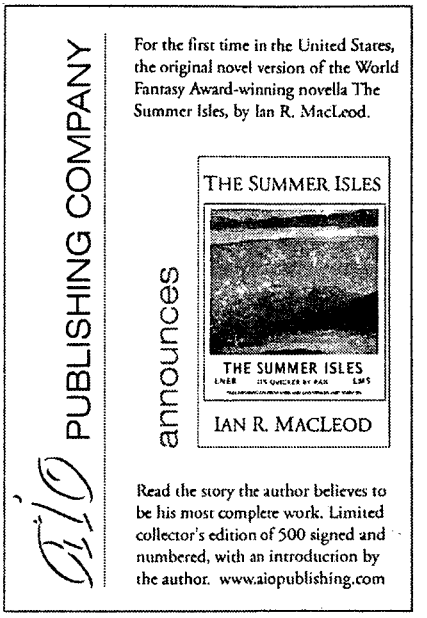
a handsome volume by Subterranean Press, which has been producing beautiful books by an impressive roster of new and established writers of the fantastic. The book is a must-have for anyone who missed this unsettling tale when it first appeared, as well as for those readers who wish the world could somehow magically expand, accordionlike, to contain boundless examples of Crowley's writings.

Finally, for readers who fit into the second category above, may I flag "The Happy Place," Crowley's essay on the inimitable Walt Kelly, creator of the daily cartoon series *Pogo*. The piece first appeared in the *Boston Review* in fall, 2004, and can be read online at *http://www.bostonreview.net/BR29.5/crowley.html*. It's a lovely, measured assessment, both of Kelly and the cartoonist's art in general; a far more insightful bit of writing than Jonathan Franzen's similarly themed *New Yorker* essay on Charles Schultz, which ran at about the same time last year.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After living for several years in West Virginia (where this new story is set), Claudia O'Keefe recently moved to New Mexico where she now works teaching creative writing to teens and pre-teens. She is the author of Black Snow Days *and the editor of several anthologies on family themes. Her story "Black Deer" appeared in our April 2005 issue.*

Maze of Trees

By Claudia O'Keefe

IF YOU EVER WANT TO SEE a setting truly fit for a fantasy novel, it's best to come to West Virginia first. Like the state's motto, we are very wild here, wild in thought, sometimes wild in appearance, but always wild in landscape.

You notice it only a few miles after crossing the state line from Virginia into West Virginia. Our mountains aren't the type that jutted up out of the Earth during ancient upheavals. Our lands formed when water and ice dug down into the Earth, carved deeply and harshly through her plateaus to reveal her womb of smooth, solid rock. Rivers surge through nearly every low area, cold and broad and disdainful of man, yet invigorating to the eye, flowing with magic's clear blood. They call us the Mountain State, but what we really are is the land of secret valleys, of places where most people don't belong and soon leave, after remarking on their beauty.

I was one of those people who should have left. Unfortunately, I was in bad shape when I arrived, thinking a nice convalescence in these deceptively gentle hills would be just what I needed. I didn't need it. I

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should have run, dumped all my baggage, both real and imagined, and fled by any means possible, jet, train, bus, on a hog wearing a saddle and hackamore, whatever. I should have left, but I didn't. I became trapped. First by poverty, then by something much stickier, nearly impossible to transcend. Something that called to me with a voice I'd longed to hear my entire life, magic — real magic — the kind that doesn't care if you believe in it and gives you power whether you want it or not (I did at first), power that will drive you mad if you let it, and I'm afraid that I am. Just a little.

I was already half nuts by the time I met Landry. He served me my grilled sea bass with melon salsa at a new restaurant up at Frost Knob the last weekend in September. Being what I was, haunting the village at Frost Knob was like dining with the enemy, but I couldn't help myself. Frost Knob is the closest thing there is to civilization in my part of the Appalachians. It's the highest ski resort on the East Coast, and during the season the place sucks in well-heeled metropolitan types from D.C., New York, and across the south. Though I didn't ski and almost never talked with anyone on my visits to 4,900 feet, I could brush by tourists wearing Ralph Lauren sheepskin jackets or carrying the latest overnight tote by Prada and draw in tantalizing hints of halfway intelligent speech — a clause here, a truncated exchange there, mention of marketing meetings, the latest editorial in *The Times*, gossip about someone's botched eye job, or silly, fractious arguments over aborted play dates, what I call miscellaneous city talk. I walked through the resort's cobbled square, opening my ears like radar. As I passed candle and bookstores, restaurants, ski shops, and a Starbucks, I'd reel in these little snippets of civilization, like a fisherman on a sea so lonely he's reduced to holding one-sided conversations with the fish flapping and gasping in his net.

I wanted so badly to return to the world I once inhabited, have friends again, find a life, but I couldn't. *It* wouldn't let me.

"Would you like the fries, rice pilaf, or Jumpin' Jack black-eyed peas with that?" Landry asked me as he stood next to my table in the Gearhead Bar & Grill. He was memorizing my order as I gave it to him, rather than write it down. This either spoke well of his memory or poorly of the house count, most likely the latter. Snow hadn't yet begun falling up here, nor

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was it cold enough to make the white stuff artificially and keep it on the ground. Still, with this being the height of the resort's fall foliage season, the place should have been littered with almost as many tourists as dying leaves. It wasn't. I'd taken care of that.

Glancing up into Landry's troubled face, I felt bad about his lack of paying customers.

"Pilaf," I said.

"Alrighty," he said. "I'll go put this in and be right back with your Cosmo."

It was the *alrighty* that got me. That a man who stood over six feet and waited tables like a Grizzly practicing jeet kune do could use a word like that suggested a self-possession I immediately liked. The *alrighty* wasn't canned like the automatic responses you learn to use with the paying public. It was just him.

He returned with my Cosmo, heavy on the cranberry, in a frosted martini glass that could have served half a frat house.

"Wow," I said.

"Frost Knob invites you to ski happy," he said. "When we finally get snow, that is."

I concentrated a second or two before answering, "Next week about this time. A rare early blizzard."

"Is that the Weather Channel talking, or are you merely prescient?"

"Maybe it's just that there big toe I broke a ways back that acts up when the weather's a-changing," I said, doing my best, tasteless imitation of my hick neighbors over in Cherry Lick. I instantly felt a rush of PC-induced guilt, and smiled apologetically a moment later.

He assessed me and I studied him. I saw his name, LANDRY, spelled in machine-engraved letters on the gold plastic tag pinned to his uniform. I saw the confident way he wore the god-awful acrylic ski sweater they'd given him, his expensive haircut only just starting to grow out, nails that were still neatly manicured, teeth and fingers that were free of nicotine stains. I'd served food and drinks off and on most of my life and I knew he wasn't a waiter, not really.

"You don't belong here," I said.

After a moment, when he glanced down at the last scraps of city cool I still owned, my ten-year-old Betsy Johnson dress, which no longer fit as

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well as it should, and the Okio sunglasses lying on the table next to my West Virginia driver's license, he smiled.

"Neither do you."

"Oh, yes," I said. "Unfortunately, I do."

Finishing lunch and deciding to give Landry my real phone number instead of one with an incorrect digit, I drove down the mountain to the base of the resort 1,700 feet below. Just west of a T-intersection joining Frost Knob to the main highway leading back to parts known, I spotted four people climbing out of a Cadillac Escalade. It was parked next to a handcrafted billboard advertising a new five-hundred-unit development that would soon replace the hardwood forest beyond it. LUXURY IN CONCERT WITH NATURE, read the developer's slogan. This meant they'd leave a few landscape-quality trees behind when they clear-cut the rest to raise their condos.

I crossed the intersection and pulled my Tracker into the parking lot in front of the tiny grocery that served the people who stayed in condos already built. I felt It coming over me, into me, using me and me using It. It waited, curled inside me, watching the four as they flipped through their glossy brochures. The saleswoman in the group gestured at a seventy-foot sugar maple, its glorious crown torched by leaves just starting to turn, and then to an area on a plat map. Two of the visitors were husband and wife, and the husband tramped up the newly bulldozed ridge behind the sign to capture virgin terrain with his digicam.

This was the moment It could use to its best advantage, my magic. I couldn't help myself, didn't want to help It, but I had become It.

I took a soft, deep breath, then released my hold on the deep place within that understood and could manipulate both humans and forest effortlessly. I raised my left hand, cupped slightly around the object I created. If you could hold a solar eclipse in the palm of your hand — a black hole the size of a man's kidney, with a hundred snapping tentacles that sucked light and life toward it with the violence of a rip current — that would describe just one of the things my magic does. Though it wasn't necessary, since the thing could fly through my windshield without being altered, I rolled down the driver's side window and flung it gently into the air.

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It shot with laser precision toward the man with the digicam. None of the four could see it, of course. I sighed, watching the thing go to work on him, hovering beside one ear and then the other, sticking its tentacles into each, wriggling and digging farther and farther inside his head, past eardrums deep into the part of the brain where mankind's most primitive reflexes reside. The man stiffened instantly, but didn't understand the shudder that raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Backing out of an ear, the writhing black ball went to work on the man's eyes next, prying up first one eyelid, then the next, sticking a tentacle underneath and smearing his eyeballs with an oily dark light. To the man, it would feel as if the forest had suddenly grown closer and darker. He would feel its lonely, claustrophobic embrace reaching out to smother him. When the thing stuck more of its tentacles up his nostrils, along the nerves and into his parietal lobes, the man would, to a lesser degree, smell the same type of panic that immobilized a horse in a burning barn.

Finally the black ball was finished with him. It floated toward the man's wife next. By the time it reached her, it was losing energy, moving less vigorously. It stuck a single tentacle into the woman's ear, and then as if pulled by a vacuum, its entire body was sucked, protesting and fading at the same time, inside her head.

Man and wife abruptly broke off what they were doing and looked around at the trees and the mountains crowding them in on all sides. Both tensed, their shoulders rigid, the complacent smiles they'd worn moments before gone. The man quit filming and stared worriedly into the shadows beneath the trees. Seconds later, he returned to the Cadillac while the wife distanced herself from the saleswoman, who noticed the change in her client's behavior, but didn't know what to make of it. A few polite yet terse exchanges later, all climbed into the Cadillac. The SUV remained a few minutes more, while the saleswoman struggled to salvage her deal, but it was useless.

They drove away.

I sat there in my car for another ten minutes, giving them a solid head start toward the safety of the sales office and human habitation. Then, thinking about Landry and his lack of paying business, I raised my left hand. On it was a tiny curl of misty light that moved up and away without my help, tendrils beating at the speed of a hummingbird's wings. It hurtled

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down the highway ahead of my Tracker on its way toward the interstate, the most popular route to Frost Knob. Bouncing from tree to tree, the tiny light dispelled the shadows my magic had placed there three weeks before, shadows the naked eye couldn't see, but that were sensed by the unconscious minds of all but the least sensitive.

I AM THE GODDESS of Lonely Spaces. Please bear in mind that I had to come up with this title by myself, as there's never been anyone to tell me who I've become. I may not be a goddess at all, but merely an oddity.

To explain what I do, let me tell you about my favorite road in these mountains, Route 7. Beginning at the turnoff from U.S. Highway 219 at Millerton, it stretches for fifty-eight miles, most of it through the Monongahela National Forest, until it reaches Freedom Forge. Winding and bending, climbing and climbing, it traverses the most sublime example of natural beauty in North America. If you've driven the snowy mountains and fjords of British Columbia's Highway 99 from Vancouver to Whistler, with its astonishing drop-offs to the pewter sea thousands of feet below, you may have thought you traveled the road to Valhalla. If you've ever been fortunate enough to take the ribbon of asphalt descending out of Los Alamos, New Mexico, with the whole of mystic Black Mesa to your northeast and the pink cliffs that become fuchsia at sunset guiding you to a dusty high desert freeway below, you might be tempted to think you're seeing exactly what the Zuni and Hopi saw thousands of years ago when they first came to the land. Take Route 7 from Millerton to Freedom Forge, however, and you'll discover a landscape so potent and unmolested it's enough to make you weep. Unlike these other roads, you can drive the entire fifty-eight miles and never pass another car, mobile home, gas station, or fast food restaurant. Instead you are immersed in a maze of trees reemerging triumphantly from the decimation of old growth forests during the previous two centuries. Your SUV flies like a private Lear jet through tunnel upon tunnel of green in the summer months, through chutes of molten red and orange leaves in the fall. You pass tiny waterfalls of stacked limestone that spray froth at your windshield and are so numerous and unplanned they appear like volunteer fruit trees springing up from carelessly thrown peach pits. You encounter a glacial bog that

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exists nowhere else in the U.S. and is lush with wild cranberry and orchids and insect-catching plants. In the winter the entire road becomes a black and white photographer's dream — black trunks, black ground, white snow, and falls frozen into monumental ice sculptures. You drive and twist and turn and marvel that there could still be a place like this in the world and somewhere about mile twenty-three it hits you.

Loneliness.

This place is too lonely for you. It's gorgeous, but you want to see something else, a town, a house, even a strip mall. You want to see signs that you aren't totally alone here. To hell with the heavenly mists weaving through the valleys and the tranquil, splashing Cherry River that dogs the highway like a New Age fanatic who won't leave you alone until you buy one of his idiotic healing energy crystals. You want a goddamn McDonald's. Fifty-eight miles of peace and quiet now seems like five hundred and eighty. You want out but you can't make up your mind. Would it be better to turn around and go back? Or should you continue on in hopes that you'll regain civilization sooner ahead?

To an extent, Nature performs this protective magic all on its own, as it has for tens of thousands of years, keeping people who would destroy it at bay. In these modern times, however, with mankind wielding the sword of technological superiority, human psychology alone isn't enough to send men and women with chainsaws and Bobcats rushing from dark glades and isolated valleys, back to the blare and growl of the city, glancing nervously over their shoulders as they flee.

I have to do it.

Landry called the next morning, up much earlier than I would expect of someone in his business, since he probably didn't get off work until close to midnight.

"Did business pick up at all after I left?" I asked.

"God, we were slammed. It was dead the rest of the afternoon and even the first part of dinner. They were even ready to let me go early. Then around seven all gustatory hell broke loose."

I calculated the time backward mentally. It's a good two-hour drive from the Interstate to Frost Knob and the little tuft of light I released at two-thirty would have cleared the darkness along the highway from the

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freeway to the resort by four. Instead of stopping to cancel their reservations in Lewisburg and turn around, as I'd encouraged them to do for weeks, the first of the hordes would have reached Frost Knob's check-in desk by six o'clock, and had an hour to get settled before descending on Landry in Gearhead. The timing fit.

"So what are you doing up at — " I checked the ghastly old plastic teapot clock on my kitchen wall, " — 8:47? You must be exhausted."

"I couldn't sleep. I'm thrilled. I'm flush. After paying my first month's rent I've got an amazing wad of cash burning a hole in my pocket. Want to do something?"

"How big a wad?"

"Just a sec. Let me count."

I waited, but he was quick.

"Eighteen dollars!" he said.

"Good thing you called me," I told him. "If you're willing to leave campus, I can show you entire towns around here you could buy for that."

"With change leftover for dinner?"

"And breakfast," I said.

I hadn't meant that to be a double-entendre, but I'm out of practice using the dialect from the land of my birth. Landry's voice held that mischievous grin I'd loved from the day before, like a bear caught with his nose in a fifty-dollar jar of Dean & DeLuca honey, but he opted to be a gentleman and instead pretended my slip had gone clear over his head.

"So where can we do the most damage with my eighteen dollars?"

I took him to a bakery in the middle of nowhere. That isn't much of a description, really, since everything around here is in the middle of nowhere, but I thought my bear would like the cinnamon sticky buns this place had to offer, baked in a genuine wood-fired oven. He did, devouring a six-pack of gooey rolls before we could finish our first cup of MauaJava.

"What is this place doing out here?" he asked, incredulous to find a gourmet-quality coffee and pastry spot on a vacant two-lane road an hour from even the least traveled tourist route.

I shrugged. "What is anyone doing out here?"

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"What brought you here?" he asked, turning more serious than I liked.

"Probably the same thing that brought you to Frost Knob."

"Bankruptcy, foreclosure, and homelessness after your systems analyst job was outsourced to Pindladoor?" he asked.

"How'd you guess?" I said, favoring him with a sympathetic smile over his situation.

He waited patiently for my real explanation.

"Is there really a place called Pindladoor?" I asked.

"You're evading," he said.

I nodded, but I wasn't hiding, at least not from myself. I turned my reasons for being here over in my head every day, every hour, every few minutes, with the frequency the average man has thoughts of sex. I hated thinking about that stupid, stupid minute in the barn behind my house eight years ago that changed everything forever, but when your world narrows in on you as tightly as a dress that's now a size and a half too small, you tend to obsess.

It wasn't my house or my barn back then. They belonged to a man I'd never met named Ariel Walkrip.

I grew up in southern California during the post-Brady Bunch Era. Los Angeles was still a demi-paradise, but starting to show a hipper urban edge. My family had lived there since the dawn of motion pictures, just a few hundred yards from where Charlie Chaplin built his studios on a then orange grove-lined Santa Monica Boulevard. When grown, the adults in my family habitually chose from two different professions, real estate or movies. I chose movies, as a writer, or rather a never-could-get-past-the-struggling-part writer. By the time the big earthquake came along in the early 1990s, demolishing my house on top of me, I was having daily work-related panic attacks and fought nightly with my coke-addicted agent boyfriend — who wouldn't represent my screenplays because he didn't want to look like he "subscribed to nepotism."

I left. I took what little remained unbroken from the earthquake, got on the Internet, and hunted up the cheapest place in the U.S. that I thought I could stand, where I could afford to sit and write the Great American novel.

Did I know that New York wasn't buying Great American novels

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anymore? No. Two years later, with an eviction notice thumbtacked to my door and urgently needing someplace even cheaper to live, I saw Ariel Walkrip's ad in the local throwaway.

> Cute 1 br./1 ba. with privacy on 80 ac. farm. $175 per month, utilities included, in exchange for light caretaking duties. 555-2419.

One hundred seventy-five dollars a month! How far I'd fallen. I remembered paying more than that for a cut and color in L.A.

Walkrip's farm was just outside an invisible Flying Brigadoon-like town called Cherry Lick. In the summer, the town mysteriously vanished into rampant overgrowth from the forest, houses fenced in by rats' nests of honeysuckle vines suspended from the trees, cut off by hillsides of weed-laced cornfields. At the end of October, the foliage died and voilà, the town reappeared.

I drove out to Walkrip's place the eighth of July, zipping by downtown Cherry Lick without realizing it, turned off where instructed and plummeted down a driveway so steep it should have had its own runaway truck ramp. At the bottom was the typical West Virginia pre-mobile home era abode, a one-and-a-half story farmhouse on homemade stone footings, recently reclad in rubbery vinyl siding. Instead of the traditional white, Walkrip had gone with cardboard brown. Various outbuildings were strewn about, a chicken coop made out of the back end of a retired U-Haul truck, a series of outhouses built one on top of another like successive civilizations in an archaeological dig, storage sheds, and a barn with an empty corral attached. No cute 1 br./1 ba. guest houses in sight.

I called out the owner's name. Several times. Knocked on his doors, front and back, thinking he might be elderly and hard of hearing. I peered in the windows. No one. This left the barn as the only other logical choice.

I turned and walked hesitantly toward the rotting locust-wood structure. On the way I passed a disturbing kitchen garden. Though compulsively tidy and laid out like something on the best of HGTV, each of the mature vegetables in the garden had been...abused. Every cucumber, pumpkin, and squash had one or more strings tied tightly about their girths. They reminded me of a half-feral calico cat I'd once rescued. When

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it was still a kitten, some sicko had placed an industrial-strength rubber band around its midsection and then abandoned it to the wilds. The kitten grew into a cat, and as it did the rubber band restricted and distorted its growth. It probably could have survived this way indefinitely, but when it became pregnant, the result was horrifying. Walkrip's vegetables had received the same treatment.

I halted next to that garden and immediately knew I wasn't going to rent anything from this man. As soon as I found him, I'd let him know I wasn't interested.

Ariel Walkrip hung from a noose at the rear of the barn. He looked exactly how I'd pictured him during our phone conversation, an old farmer no different from a hundred other farmers out here, worn-out body in jeans, plaid shirt, and a John Deere cap. His eyes were nearly closed, his face bloated and purple, the fingertips on his arthritic hands pendulous and dark as well, like baby eggplant. His feet had swollen so badly with accumulated blood that his tightly tied shoes couldn't contain the flesh. It spilled over the constrictions, reminding me of the abnormally grown vegetables outside.

Instinctively, I knew he was dead, but I remembered something from research I'd done for a script involving a CSI team. You have to know what you're doing when you hang yourself, or else you won't snap your neck cleanly. Instead you can dangle and dangle until you suffocate instead, an agonizing way to go. I couldn't live with myself if I ran out of the barn without checking first to make certain Walkrip was really deceased and not simply unconscious and in need of emergency help.

Fighting every step before I took it, my toes dragging through the dust and straw, I approached.

"Hello," I said. "Mr. Walkrip?"

When he didn't respond, I dared myself, commanded myself, gingerly reached out and took one of his leather-clad toes between my forefinger and thumb to give his foot a little shake.

I couldn't see It, but I sensed It come awake at my touch. It had crouched there, inside Walkrip's body, just waiting for me to come along and rescue It. That power over loneliness. It jumped off the dead man faster than a flea and coated Itself to my skin. I went into agony, my body suddenly unable to breathe as if every inch of it were covered in metallic

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paint. Rays of silver light stabbed at my peripheral vision and I felt the thing bite into every last nerve ending I had and work its way upstream with its fiberoptic heat toward my brain. My body was wracked with minute convulsions. Choking, losing consciousness, I lifted one hand in front of my face and saw my flesh flaring jaggedly like video shot by a war correspondent on the run.

I fell face first toward a dung-covered floor.

When I came to, I knew it was morning. Walkrip swung gently overhead in the breeze and I lay on the barn's rock scrabble flooring. Poised inches from my face was a green grasshopper, holding up a leaf from a pin oak. As I watched, the insect raised the leaf just a little higher over its head, then dropped it in front of me and slowly backed away, long, crooked leg by long, crooked leg.

Frowning, I fumbled for the leaf. The instant I touched it, I knew I was no longer me. The old me couldn't tell you exactly where to find the tree it had fallen from. The new me could tell you which branch.

Blundering through Walkrip's unlocked back door in search of a phone to call the authorities, I stepped into a kitchen just as bizarre as the garden outside. Gleaming new Corian countertops hugged the walls, installed above a set of dilapidated particleboard cabinets, two with doors hanging by a single hinge. Centered on the nearest countertop was a piece of paper, and beside that a plate of home-baked Tollhouse cookies covered with clingwrap.

SORRY, read the note, in oversized, shaky handwriting. I BAKED YOU SOME COOKIES.

I KNEW I COULDN'T tell Landry any of this. I'd never told anyone. For one, I had no family left, and my friends back in L.A. had all turned out to be of the fair-weather variety. I'd made acquaintances, but no solid friends in my decade lost in Appalachia. As desperately as I wanted someone to talk to about everything, I didn't want to send Landry running and screaming back to his mountaintop. I didn't just want — I needed the connection he offered, like a lifesaving procedure or the human equivalent of a bottle of Zoloft.

"Carly?" He put down his coffee. "Are you okay?"

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"Yes. I'm sorry. Just thinking about your question. Why I chose West Virginia."

"Why did you?"

"It's disaster free. No earthquakes, no hurricanes, no terrorists, tornadoes, riots, or nuclear power plants to melt down. Sure, we have floods, but if you live on a mountaintop, you're pretty much safe."

"Safety, I can understand that," Landry said quietly, but his eyes didn't agree with his words. I knew he knew there was more to the story. I watched his eyelids flicker as he studied me, curious for the truth. He opened his mouth, then closed it, and touched my hand instead, stroking it softly with his finger, as the wheels inside him turned.

"How did you know?" Landry asked me over the phone.

It was the fifth of October, and outside, the horror that is a West Virginia winter had set in two months early. Winter is dark and choking here. I hate it with a passion so overwhelming I can't think straight once it arrives. It comes at you like that stranger you dread at a roadside rest stop, the one who will abduct you and lock you in his trunk until you're dead and he can play with you.

The first snow of every year is like an unwelcome anniversary for me, reminding me that I am trapped with no hope of ever escaping.

"Carly?"

"*Farmer's Almanac*," I said finally, explaining away my foreknowledge of the storm I'd predicted when we met the week before.

"You read the *Farmer's Almanac*," he said. He sounded skeptical.

"No, but everyone else here does and is constantly blabbing about it."

"Incredible. I figured they used a random number generator to make their predictions," he said. "Either that or threw groundhogs at dart boards."

"They probably do," I agreed.

We talked for more than two hours, until my phone went dead in the middle of one of his jokes. I never did find out how many Pindladoor programmers it takes to screw in a light bulb. Though I sensed he was doing his best to help lift me out of a depression I couldn't quite mask, I also suspected that he didn't really enjoy the joke himself, because it touched on a nerve he wished would go numb. He couldn't know how

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grateful I was just to hear his voice that bleak afternoon, warming me with his easygoing humor.

As a goddess, my territory is pitifully small. It covers portions of just five tiny counties along the West Virginia state line north of I-64, plus a narrow swath of three border counties in neighboring Virginia. I haven't been out of my territory in eight years, ten if you count the two years I lived here before my transformation. I'm tethered here by the magic that runs through me now. I am at its mercy. Profit-driven land developers may not be able to invade my territory, but as urgently as I want to go home, I can no longer set foot in their territory either.

I've never been able to figure out what exactly defines my boundaries, except that I can't enter a town with more than a certain number of dwellings, enough to house a population of three thousand or greater, without experiencing discomfort. Sixty-five hundred is the threshold at which I go into extreme distress. I don't want to think about what would happen if someone forcibly took me beyond my boundaries for longer than a few minutes. I know, more than suspect, that the magic inside me would rebel, and likely slip from my control, damaging many around me before it finally fed on and consumed my life.

Logically my territory makes little sense. Portions of both the Monongahela and Washington National Forests, not to mention many private and forested lands, extend well beyond it. What, if anything, protects those areas? I wonder. Does anything or anyone guard nature's other remote and hidden lands? I've never met another like me. Nor did I receive any postmortem clues from the late Ariel Walkrip. His will stipulated only that his house and property go to the first person to touch his body.

Landry made me feel like a human again that winter. God, how I loved him for being the kind of person he was. He taught me to ski under the stars and begged me to do ridiculous, even embarrassing things, like salsa dance underwater in the resort's indoor rock grotto pool. He hacked us into their reservation system, where he would appropriate empty condos for us, each complete with balcony hot tubs. We'd make feverish love in the open air and bubbling water, then afterward lie sated, wrapped in towels on the thick living room carpet. With our faces pressed against floor-to-ceiling windows, we watched Christmas and New Year's Day

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dawning through swirling snow that flecked the dead brown hills spread below us like spots on a sleeping fawn.

I showed him wonders as well, taking him trekking on snowshoes into the deepest wilderness I knew, a place no one, not even research scientists, loggers, or the forest service had been for more than a century. History claims that the last Eastern Woodland Bison was slaughtered in Randolph County in 1825 and that the last gray wolf in West Virginia was hunted down in 1900, also in Randolph. Crouching low on a granite spar overlooking one of my secret valleys, we spied on huffing, foraging buffalo whose shaggy manes tinkled with curtains of ice. Hidden downwind in a ring of birch saplings, we peered between the slender trunks while wolf pups entertained us unaware, roughhousing in fresh powder. Landry didn't realize my subspecies of buffalo were supposed to be extinct, nor the wolves disappeared from the wild. He assumed the wolves were officially introduced transplants from Canada and the buffalo escapees from a ranch raising gourmet steaks. I didn't correct him, but I worried that I had violated my own magic in revealing them to him. If it weren't for my power, I would never have known they were there. Someone before me, possibly pre-dating Ariel's tenure, had set up a type of invisible fence around them, allowing them just enough territory to roam and remain healthy, but herding them well away from exposure to hunters. I was meant to continue the guardianship. Would Landry tell people about them when he returned to civilization after the season was over?

"I was thinking about those wolves," he said to me one night a couple weeks after we returned from our weekend trip to the backcountry. I lay curled against his furry chest in our ill-gotten hotel room bed. The covers were tossed on the floor and our legs sprawled inelegantly on the king-size mattress. We'd been listening to pine logs pop and sizzle in the fireplace.

"What about them?" I asked, alarm ringing through me.

"Nothing really," he said. He absently fingered a lock of my hair hanging down into my face. "Just thinking about them."

He looked down at me then, gently tucking the lock of hair behind my ear. "You're such a wild child, Carly," he said.

"Hardly wild and a long time from being a child."

"You know what I mean. I'm not talking about parties and drugs and pissing in the face of authority. You *know* what I mean."

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I wanted to sit up and pull away from him, but didn't dare let him see I was afraid. My heart raced and I was certain he could feel my pulse crashing blindly, thudding hard against his naked skin.

"How did you know where to find the wolves? How not to spook them? We were so close and they didn't even realize we were there. They should have, shouldn't they? They have powerful noses."

"I have a powerful nose, too," I said.

"I know you do," he said, momentarily playful. "You found me."

"And that's how I found them."

"Why is it then that I'm a ten times better skier than you, but you're the one who downhills flawlessly in the dark? You never hit anything, no near misses, no tripping. You're fearless out there. You even knew exactly when to turn back for home when that squall came up, but let us go just a little farther than we should have."

"I didn't know. I told you."

"You told me, but I think you kept us going until it was almost too late because you thought it was exciting."

"It was exciting, wasn't it?"

He frowned, searching my eyes for the answer he wanted and not finding it.

"Yes," he said at last. "I was scared shitless we'd get turned around and lost in the storm, but we didn't. We made it back." He paused. "How did you know where to find those wolves, Carly?"

"I've lived here a long time."

"How long?"

"Ten years."

He thought that over for several seconds, accepting what the answer contained rather than what it didn't.

"How often do you get back? To the city, I mean?"

"It's been ten years."

"What? You haven't left in a decade?"

"I don't make enough to go anywhere."

I realized how lame that sounded the moment it was out of my mouth. If I could afford the occasional meal at his restaurant, I could afford a tank of gas to take me to D.C. or at least as far as Charlottesville.

Rather than question my argument, however, he surprised me by

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asking, "What would you say if I asked you to come with me when I returned?"

My breath halted in my throat. I was unable to speak as I fought off tears. *A truth that isn't a lie. I need a truth to tell him that isn't a lie.*

"I would love it if I could go back to the city with you," I told him.

I hadn't realized that his arms had tensed around me until I gave my half-baked answer. He relaxed then with a sigh.

"Thank you," he said.

I made certain every moment of that season with Landry was as perfect as it could be. During his days on, business flowed into Frost Knob from all points of the compass and ended up at his restaurant. I didn't have any power over the tables he got or how much he was tipped, of course, but on the nights he worked the place was packed. On his days off, however, every highway leading to the mountaintop playground took on forbidding, unwelcome shadows and skiers who lingered too close to the treelines felt something watching them, a natural menace they couldn't explain, but which sent them hurrying to their condos to pack up and head back for the city. I didn't want it to be a ghost town, that would have been bizarre and upsetting to Landry, but I needed him to myself and didn't want him called in to wait tables because Gearhead got too busy. I'd also spent too much time in the village and the migraines I suffered at exposure to the development there worsened each time I visited. It was like an allergy on overdrive, like a poison taken in gradually larger doses until a lethal toxicity is nearly reached.

I begged off from staying in those free hotel rooms, but never once suggested that we go to my place. Landry didn't question me about it outright, but I could tell he thought this strange and he had every right.

"I live in a shack," I told him. "An honest to God hillbilly shack."

"Don't tell me. With an outhouse?"

"Three." I neglected to mention that they were no longer used and that my farmhouse had two perfectly usable bathrooms.

"What's the third one for?"

"The third one?"

"One for boys, one for girls. What's the third one for?"

"Around here? Lord only knows," I said.

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And the topic was dropped, at least momentarily. I can't say why I didn't want to bring Landry home. Instinctively, I sensed there was danger for us there. From what, I couldn't say, but I knew it the way I knew where to find the missing boy who wandered off in early February, leaving the safety of his parents' condominium before the sun came up.

One afternoon I observed Landry scribble furiously on napkin after napkin he yanked from the dispenser on the window bar at Starbucks. Our seats looked out on the heart of the village. It was one of our favorite spots. That day, however, Landry was deep into his own head, inspired in a way I had never seen him before.

"What is that stuff?" I asked about his writings.

"When they let me go, after I was forced to train my Pindladoor replacement that was, they took away my whole life in the name of profit," he said. "I've been searching for a way to take that profit away from them, and this," he stabbed violently at the latest in his series of napkins with a happy, mad-computer-programmer gleam in his eye, "just may be the way to do it. A new service that makes theirs obsolete!"

"I was wondering why you fled from the city to our fair metropolis," I said.

He looked up at me then, really hearing me for the first time in half an hour. I saw that gleam in his eye wink out and die like a cheap light bulb from China. He stared at me, reluctance on his lips, and said nothing.

The silence progressed until it was close to awkwardness. Then more than a dozen non-tourists, most in sheriff and rescue uniforms, rushed by our window. Next came a flurry of civilians, among them a fellow waiter Landry recognized from the restaurant.

Landry rapped on our window, calling the waiter's attention. The man pushed open the coffee bar's front door and leaned inside.

"Hey, Landry."

"What's up?" Landry asked.

"A kid's gone missing from Mogulmonkey."

Mogulmonkey was a townhouse-style condo complex adjacent to the resort's snowtube park.

"They think he's been abducted, but they're mounting a search anyway," the waiter said.

Landry looked stricken.

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"Okay," he said. "We'll be right there."

He hurriedly crammed his notes into his pockets and then grabbed me by the hand. I barely had time to lunge for my purse before I found myself rushing along with the others toward a command post erected under an E-Z UP tent outside the administrative offices. SUVs filled with searchers pulled up as if in a precision driving drill and two women dashed out of the admin building with stacks of photocopied photos of the boy. Radios squawked all over the parking lot.

"Landry, slow down a minute," I said. "Landry."

As if suddenly aware that he clutched my hand fiercely in his, he stopped so hard on the ice I skidded into him. "Sorry. Do you want to go back to Starbucks and wait for me?"

I studied his expression, trying to figure him out. "No, of course not. You know how well I know this area. I want to help. It's just that — "

"Good girl," he said, squeezing my hand. We continued our sprint toward the command post.

He finally released me once he reached the line-up dividing the volunteers into search parties. I backed away into the trees. Landry didn't even notice. If the boy was still in my territory, I could find him. I only needed a moment.

Most people think of the forest as an insensate thing, but it feels just like the rest of us. I closed my eyes and touched the nearest spruce. The trees were frightened, absorbing the child's own terror and sending it outward in waves. They told me what I needed to know. Confused by the pre-dawn mist, the boy had walked off a cliff. When I returned to the E-Z UP, Landry already had our search assignment. He showed me our section of grid on the map. I shook my head.

"Who has that?" I pointed at an area well beyond the last black diamond run.

"No one, I think," he said.

"I think that would be the best place to look."

Vertical lines appeared between his eyebrows and his lips turned down. "Why?"

"There's an old mine down there."

"A mine. What kid would want to check out a mine in the middle of February?"

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Landry was right. Besides, the mine was actually securely boarded and miles from where I sensed the boy at this very moment dropping exhausted into a shaded ice bank, immobile and curling into a fetal ball.

"Please, Landry," I said. "I have a hunch."

He sighed. "All right." He went to speak to the search coordinator.

A few minutes later we were in my Tracker, bombing down an officially closed road on the backside of the mountain. Snow heaped on the road in two- to four-foot drifts, and beneath that, rock-hard berms crisscrossed both lanes. As testament to the strangely grim mood affecting Landry, he made no mention of the road's condition or my outrageous driving. I saw a torment in him I didn't like. My sole concerns were to rescue the boy and relieve Landry's unexplained suffering.

Once we reached the only route accessible to us I knew we were even farther from the child than we had been at the top of the mountain. We'd find his bloody footprints in the snow approximately four and a half miles to the north-northeast.

How would I direct Landry where we needed to go without drawing his suspicion? As he trudged forward into the calf-high snow, I hesitated at the side of the road and glanced up at the sun's position in the sky. We wouldn't reach our destination before dark and Landry, as strong as I knew him to be, didn't have the energy to make it to the boy's side before nightfall. No one did.

What does it sound like when you're struck by lightning? People who imagine the event often think that the unlucky victim hears a crash, a bang, something on the order of a sonic boom, a fiery crackle from God's own hand. In reality it's nothing like that. The last thing you hear before you die is a simple *click*.

That's what Landry heard next. Behind his back, I lifted my hands to the sunny blue and whispered a single word.

Landry cried out, not in pain, but surprise. For a split second the skies over my miles and miles of territory went totally dark.

"What was — "

The borrowed light caught him in the breastbone like a lance as he turned to ask me if I'd just seen what he'd seen, a moment's pitch black.

He staggered back, gasping like a fish who has suddenly learned to breathe, and clutched at his chest. A second after that he sucked in a deep,

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confident breath. His cramped shoulders pushed down and back and he stood taller. His head came up, a near-delirious smile lighting his face, truly from within. His eyes and his cheeks warmed with a healthy, sure glow. He had no idea what had happened to him, wouldn't even be certain that something had happened to him, but he liked it.

I pretended frustration. "I'm sorry, Landry, now that we're down here, I'm not sure which way to go. All these trees and no path."

He turned in the direction we needed to go, beckoning me to follow. "Don't worry. This way."

His legs carved unfailingly through virgin snow crust, covering ground at a pace that I hoped he wouldn't compare to normal speeds. I also prayed he wouldn't wonder how I could possibly keep up with him. The light inside him touched the salt cedars as we swept past and the trees told the light inside him what it needed to know.

By twilight, he knelt by the crumpled body in its hollow of ice.

I gasped when I saw the boy, lips dark as frozen blueberries and his right foot nearly cut in half from his fall onto rocks at the bottom of the cliff. How had he managed to march so far with his foot flapping the wrong way at every step?

Humans amaze me, I thought with wonder.

The boy whimpered. Landry scooped him up and we took off at a run. At first Landry led the way unerringly back to the car as the child grew quieter and colder. Halfway there, though, we knew we were losing him. Landry ran faster, then began to wheeze, the light inside him rapidly leaking away. Not only did he slow dangerously, but —

"I don't remember which way," he said, faltering.

"I do," I prompted gently. "I remember."

I practically had to drag them. When Landry broke through the final knife-sharp stretch of ice between us and the car, he tripped and crashed to his knees, almost dropping the boy in his weariness.

This momentary weakness put a fear in him I didn't understand. He hugged the boy tighter to his chest, cradled him.

"Got you, got you, got you," he crooned, a mantra.

"Landry," I said.

"Got you, got you, got you."

I repeated his name. He didn't hear me. He let go of the boy with one

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hand and raised the hand to cover his eyes in a universal expression of anguish. The woods around us, previously lit by the light shining through him, dimmed. His golden skin grew as dusky as the twilight.

In the dark I said, "You have a son."

"Had," he answered. "A son."

"What happened?"

"My wife...."

"Won't let you see him?"

"They're dead."

"Oh, Landry."

"It was after I lost my job. I didn't understand how much it affected her. The foreclosure, the prospect of living on the street. The house was hers originally. It had been in her family for generations. I didn't pay enough attention," he said. "I think she felt trapped. I think that was why she did it."

"What?"

He dropped his hand from his eyes and the sun looked up at me, with clouds in the way.

"Fire," he said. "She chose fire."

THOUGH THE BOY'S unexpected and miraculous return stunned the rescue crews, Landry never expressed doubts about how we managed to reach the boy in time, much less find him at all. Almost a week after we rushed the child to paramedics and his hysterical family, the event was old news. I believe Landry regretted his confession to me about his family and his part in their deaths and didn't want that day brought up again. I wished many times he would revive the topic so I could reassure him, but he never did.

We picked up our old routines. Though I was in agony much of the time, I joined him enthusiastically again in our pilfered luxury condos. March came, then April, but the slopes remained white and deep. Spring skiing season didn't want to end. Everyone at the resort remarked about the freakishly long season that looked as though it might stretch into May. It wouldn't. I had limits and should have known the forest wouldn't let me tamper much longer. It wanted to wake, to get the growing season up and

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running. Summers are pathetically short here, and the land needed every sunny or thunderously rainy day it could harvest from the sky.

On the last Sunday in April, we spent several hours hiking the Greenbrier Trail, reclaimed land along the Greenbrier River on which the C & O Railroad used to transport timber and coal and isolated Appalachian families to the big city. Landry snapped photo after digital photo of Dutchman's breeches, bloodroot, Jack-in-the-pulpit, and trilliums that grew by the river, every wildflower sparkling with droplets that condensed out of the mist. Afterward, hungry, we stopped at a gas station that sold pizza and biscuits in its convenience store.

I knew the store well, because the owner was my neighbor nearly an hour away in Cherry Lick. I didn't like Vernice McCalder and she had been antagonistic with me from the day I moved into Ariel's place. She wouldn't admit it, but I suspected that the two of them had had a thing for each other. She'd probably been expecting to inherit his place.

"How much do you want?" Landry asked as he pulled my Tracker up to the pump.

"Better fill it," I said. "It's a long way back to the resort. I'll get us something to eat."

At the back of the store I chose a pizza from one of the two or three habitually boxed and waiting in the glassed warming oven, plus a couple of bottled teas out of the cooler.

"You know the only difference between a Methodist and Baptist, don't you?" an old farmer said to another man I recognized and knew dug wells for a living.

His listener didn't answer.

"Methodists can read."

Both men chuckled.

Incredibly, though his audience didn't grow, and no significant conversation had occurred in between, the farmer told the same joke a second time just seconds later. I tried to shut out their voices, but still heard the two laugh softly and mindlessly as if the joke were fresh.

I set the pizza box and drinks on the counter and reached into my purse for my wallet, when, as if caught in a time loop, the farmer by the beer nuts clapped his companion on the shoulder, and sucked in a breath to begin again.

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"You know the only difference between a — "

I nearly bolted from the store.

Vernice stopped me. At her post behind the counter, she'd faced the pumps, observing Landry filling up my gas tank. Now she turned and set something on the counter so she could take my money, which I realized I gripped convulsively in my fist. I looked down and saw what she'd been holding, a partially completed plastic canvas picture of a teddy bear holding a balloon that read W.W.J.D? *What Would Jesus Do*? Smoker's lines around her mouth puckered as she studied me.

"Not a good idea," she said, gaze flicking toward Landry. "Ariel would know better."

I was stunned. She *knew*. She'd always known what I was.

"Ariel played bondage games with his vegetables and then hung himself in his barn," I said. "Is he really an example to follow?"

"I'm warning you," Vernice said. "Don't use cuss words in my store, Carly."

I struggled to locate the expletive in my previous two sentences. "Bondage? Since when is that a swear word?"

She hissed at the repetition of the word and clutched her plastic stitchery to her breast. "God bless you, child. I'll pray for you at revival tonight."

"Please don't," I said and slammed out the door.

I have never since felt the way I did the night before Landry was due to leave. I understood my power better then than I had in all the years I'd possessed it. Loneliness is a fearsome enemy. Humans can stand any number of setbacks — poverty, starvation, the worst pain their bodies can inflict, homelessness, disaster, the moment before death, and the centuries upon centuries of life that remain once a loved one is gone forever. They can weather it and emerge from under the sledgehammer of it all as long they have one thing. Someone to go through it with them. Even if that person is not kind to them, they know at least that they are not alone.

What would you do if you were the last person on Earth? I know what I would do: shoot myself the instant I was certain no one else remained alive. Would I stop to write an epitaph? Something that extraterrestrial

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archeologists might discover thousands of millennia from now? Hell no. Over and done with. B'bye.

What would you do, however, if dragged off to an environment that was too different from your own for you to ever be happy? Not strange enough to make life impossible, but filled with a people whose mindset was so alien from yours that you would never, as long as you lived, find yourself laughing honestly again, had to guard who you were from them, censor everything you said or did, had no one, absolutely no one to talk to or walk with or run to when life was crap and something devastating happened? What if you knew you would never see home again?

Then, by miracle, a piece of home comes to you, not just a sliver or a suggestion or an empty memory, but a huge, comforting, bathrobe-sized piece of it. It wraps you up in its remembered cocoon. You sink back into its warmth, hug its security around you and for the first time in years you breathe the type of sigh that signals everything is right with your world.

That was Landry to me. Home and much more. If he and I had discovered each other before the earthquake, I never would have ended up in this breathtaking dump called Cherry Lick.

He expected me to go with him the next morning.

We'll do this when we get back, Carly. We'll do that. *The start-up will take a lot of work at first, but you don't have to worry that I'll neglect you. I'll make certain we have all the time we need together. I'll never lose track of us.*

I heard echoes of the tragedy with his wife and son, but I also heard the beginnings of something real for us. You can't fool the breeze that carries the words your heart speaks. It ferries your soul across spaces open or closed and not even the sturdiest door can keep it out. Only you can refuse to hear it. That is one of humankind's strongest powers, the ability to not hear another's heart.

I heard his heart. I knew my own. I couldn't go and I couldn't tell him why. I could change the course of floods, ask a valiant, forgotten apple tree to sacrifice itself so the forest could reclaim its place, calm a frenzied owl before it shredded its wing on a barbed-wire fence, but I couldn't face the man I loved and tell him good-bye.

Is it any wonder I did what I did?

* * *

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Blinding rain savaged my mountains that night. Storms bloated the creeks, sent torrents of frigid mud sweeping down into the hollows. Below my farmhouse, the Greenbrier roared. Water sheeted from my chin. Ropes of it snaked across my breasts and down my arms.

I stood motionless in the downpour until I lost track of time. My teeth began to chatter and my skin grew icy.

It's time, I thought.

I sank my hand into my own chest and pulled out my heart. For several minutes I held it, studying it without amazement, simply staring. It was a ghostly version, still pumping and bleeding ephemeral red mist. I hurled it at the ground with all the anger inside of me.

It hit, a sick thud that terrified the oaks nearby. The thing burrowed into the earth with lightning intelligence, planting itself. In my mind, I could see the thick tree roots under my feet recoiling at the bloody apparition's intrusion into their space. Within seconds, the invader anchored itself in the rocky soil. Less than a minute later it swelled and sprouted spectral mycelium as thick as my wrist, root-like structures snaking outward in all directions, handless forearms that grew and grew. They carried a red river of loneliness, thickening with it until they became as big around as second-year sycamores, then century maples, then old-growth behemoths.

Around me trees thrashed in the wind, like waves crashing on invisible rocks. I sensed but could no longer feel my actual, physical heart continuing to beat. The center of me was calm. I was the eye, and storms seen and unseen raged along stalled fronts that would not move as long as I wanted to keep them in place.

Standing in the rain, I breathed quietly and waited. At last the voracious growth slammed up against my territory's boundaries and could go no further. A bloody fairy-ring hundreds of square miles in size lay under all and everything I controlled. Following nature, the phantom mycelium made a ninety-degree turn upward. Spores exploded from the ground, red, pulsing, veined lightballs that no longer resembled my heart, but carried a piece of it in each. One for every person who needed to leave.

Only I could see as they sought their targets, the cheerful hearts of the tourists, the thoughtless ones, musing ones, cruel ones, careless, self-involved, loving and hateful, thousands of hearts spinning in their own

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individual orbits suddenly touched by the unstoppable panic and fear I fought off daily.

"Go home," I said. "Now."

Turned and walked back to my farmhouse.

I stripped off my wet clothes. I curled up on the living room sofa under a blanket I had knit myself from wool purchased from a neighbor and watched television, mindless reality TV. Thunder made the house shiver and mountains cower. Though the village square at Frost Knob swam in frigid water, the asphalt along Route 219 was dry and welcoming. Rain clouds spared each and every road leading away. Wouldn't want any accidents, would I? It would only delay their flight. It wasn't just the resort's residents I sent packing, however. My fairy-ring found all who weren't already firmly rooted here, those with the luxury of escape.

I smiled bitterly. A part of my mind watched the melee from afar, half-zipped suitcases spilling clothing as they were flung into the backs of SUVs, condo and cabin doors left gaping, car doors barely closed before tires spun. Another part of my brain watched a woman on TV in a dirty bathing suit forcing down a bowl of live sand crabs. Arguments and altercations flared here and there throughout the rain-streaked Alleghenies, but they were soon overrun by the group gestalt, that primitive back brain drive to flee, lemmings to the sea of city lights awaiting them.

My forest cried. I apologized to it, assured it that this horrible human storm would blow over by dawn, but it cried. I no longer felt the loneliness. I'd given it all away. No other emotion took its place.

Please, the forest begged. I didn't understand. I couldn't be hurting it. I *was* the forest. I could only hurt the body to which it clung.

I thought about that. Ariel and his rope flashed in my mind, a vision opening before me with the gaiety of a Hallmark card pulled from its envelope. But not rope.

I threw off the blanket and ran outside again into the deluge.

"Carly!" I heard Landry shout from uphill near the farmhouse. "Carly!"

I shut out his voice. I made the thousands upon thousands of wildly beating hearts rage in my ears as cars hurtled along dark two-lane highways. I laughed. I *laughed*, cold, wet laughter with the tang of too

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many dead years, too much of my soul drained out of me. Joyless laughter smothered by the winds whipping the river in front of me.

I can ask the river to help me, I thought. I don't have to do it myself.

"Carly."

I sighed, let all the breath out of my lungs as I prepared to command the black blanket lapping at my toes to reach up and let me sleep next to Mother Earth.

"Carly, stop it." His voice just steps behind me. "Carly." His hands on my shoulders. Turning me around. Making me look up into his face. He was afraid, of me or for me, I didn't know.

"Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"I know what you're doing."

"Doing."

"This. However you're driving them out. Stop it."

"I'm not."

"I know you are."

"How did you find me?"

"The woman at the store, the one you had words with. Now, stop. Someone's going to get hurt."

"*I'm* hurt."

"I know, honey."

He reached out to wrap me naked in his arms, but I stepped back up to my calves in the rushing water.

"You don't know anything," I shouted.

"I know. I've known for weeks."

"You don't know me."

"The blizzard you predicted, the wolves, the way we found that kid. Did you think I didn't realize what you did to me that day?"

"I didn't do anything."

"The gifts, Carly. Did you think I didn't see the gifts? At first I thought it was just some freak of nature, one perfect berry, an acorn, a single amazing feather left every morning we woke up together, right at our door. But then I saw them leaving them for you. Saw them making their offerings."

I'd forgotten about the gifts months ago. They still came, one every

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morning since I'd woken in the barn beneath a corpse, but I'd stopped looking at them. It had been years since I appreciated them.

"Landry, I — "

Like ripples in a pool, spreading outward from where I stood, the ghosts of my heart abruptly departed. They lifted from the thousands upon thousands of bodies they controlled, drifting upward into the night, thinning into nothingness the way smoke, gray and curling, disappears above a bonfire. I felt the people I'd wanted to chase away slow and regain their senses. I heard their pulses wind down. Clouds broke off their assault on the land. Skies cleared and leaves dripped.

Landry grabbed for and hauled me out of the river.

"I can't go with you," I told him. "I want to go, but I can't."

"What? Of course you can."

"No."

He started to protest further, ask why. He thought he knew what I was, but he didn't. So I spread my arms, and as I did, he saw what held me, who I really was.

I was never naked in my forest. My skin was my gown, bark thick and gnarled as hickories born before Thomas Jefferson made his brave journeys over the mountains from Virginia. Honeysuckle vines caressed and strangled my throat. Branchlets budded and flowered over and over again from my fingertips. I felt that pain and struggle of unending birth, quiet death. My head was pulled back viciously by my hair, grown over the years until it became trapped inside a burl that hung behind my shoulders in the shape of a hood. Heavy, unyielding roots encased my thighs and ankles, hiding everything human in their drapes and folds. Larger, more intricate, thousands of times greater than the roots of the fairy-ring, they traveled out to touch every last growing thing in the mountains I protected.

Landry uttered a small, stunned noise. He fought for words, but to his credit, he didn't run.

"Which one is the illusion?" he asked at last.

What he witnessed melted away to leave me the way he expected. The forest stopped weeping and I began. He watched me for several seconds and I had no idea what he was thinking.

"I don't know anymore."

He picked me up and took me into the house, to my bed.

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"Carly." He lay down next to me, wrapped us in the quilt that covered the bed, dried my face and thumbed away my tears with his gentle hands.

"I want to go," I said. "I'm so tired of being here."

"Shh," he whispered. "Let me take the pain away."

It was our last time together, so I gave him control. I trusted him to take me all the places I'd wanted so badly to go. I had dominion over the lonely places, but he owned all the rest, far, golden realms I barely remembered, open, noisy, crowded, landscapes dirty yet lived in, wanton human vistas set to a rhythm that lived for itself and thought of no one else, as we thought of no one. For one night. Just this one night they were mine, too. I was homesick, but he took it and spun my ache into pleasure. My desire for release became his reason. He sought redemption inside me. We were warmth and blistering heat, solace and cure for things that can never be completely healed. I dragged every memory of his world from behind the shutters in his eyes, distant sights and sounds that clung to the planes and angles of his face. My lips tasted everything he would see the next day, creative genius and traffic, jealousy and elevators, tandoori chicken, glittering storefronts, smog, and new hope. We were flesh on flesh on flesh and twining urgencies. We ate the moment whole. We gorged. We stole tomorrow out from under our feet and strained to keep it there with us as long as we could. Pushed. Clung. Rocked it between us.

"Give me," he said.

I gave.

"*Give* me."

I gave him everything that I had and was.

"Let it go, Carly."

I shared everything I knew and didn't, the pain, the power.

"Let it all go!" he cried at the exact moment we touched perfection.

Light harsher and more cleansing than if I had borrowed a day's worth of sun blinded me. I closed my eyes and threw my head back. Ecstasy swept through me like heated syrup. A flash burn of relieved joy prickled the damp skin at my throat, the tender insides of my wrists. Landry cried out. At first I thought it was delight, but then as physical saturation turned to scorching pain, I knew something was wrong. I looked at Landry. The

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light around us continued to flare so brightly my shocked retinas saw only the black form of a man outlined by a corona.

"Landry!"

My back arched in surprise, my body suddenly not my own. I felt as if someone stuck a spoon into the back of my throat and dug out something that clung there fiercely by its roots. I struggled, gagging, shuddering uncontrollably. It went on and on until I knew I'd gotten the wish I'd made down by the river. Oblivion. Landry collapsed heavily atop me, his weight too much for me this close to death.

I blacked out.

IT WASN'T EVEN DAWN. No sunlight filtered into my room when I felt someone sit down beside me on the bed. I wanted to wake and speak, see if Landry was okay, if I had hurt him when we made love, but as hard as I tried I couldn't sit up. I didn't even have the strength to open my eyes.

"Sleep more," I mumbled.

"Sleep more," Landry agreed.

Minutes or hours later, I found myself being carried fully clothed outside. Heard gravel crunching under Landry's feet. Smelled the dew beginning to settle. I struggled to open my eyes, managed brief slits before the effort taxed me completely. Still dark.

"What's wrong?" I said, "It's not morning yet."

"Hush, little one," he said. He settled me in the passenger's seat of the Tracker, buckled my seat belt, and tucked the sleep-tousled hair that had fallen into my face behind my ear. "I want to show you something."

I drifted in and out as the car sped along. Why did I feel so strange? Why was I trapped in sleep? I dreamed I felt weak, weaker than I had felt in eight years, but also lighter, like someone who had lost fifty pounds surviving a deadly illness. As if I was unbothered by gravity. I could spring up stairs, climb like an eight-year-old, run and run until I fell down panting and laughing in the grass somewhere with....

"Landry?"

I found myself on my feet, standing next to the Tracker. What was going on? Landry passed his hand over my eyes and, slowly, I was able to open them. Disoriented, I didn't recognize where we were at first. I turned

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in a circle and realized we were at the farthest edge of my territory, where the forest touched the frontage road leading to the Interstate. I hadn't dared try and come this far in years.

"What is it? Why are we here?" I asked. "What did you want to show me?"

"Freedom," he said.

"What?"

I gazed up into his face. Lit by the rising sun, his eyes held pure wildness. Their feral mysteries confused me. His skin gave off the scent of bark and the musty fullness of birch leaves in May.

"Oh, God. *No*."

He gestured at the Tracker behind me, loaded with packed suitcases and boxes of possessions, all of them mine.

"This is as far as I can take you. I can't go any farther than this. You understand, don't you?"

Panic filled my chest, my heart stuttered, but the anxiety, the strangling call of the mountains, the crushing weight on my chest were missing. I was so many things at once. Dazed, bereft, outraged, sad, lightheaded. I could breathe.

"The pain," I said.

He playfully touched his finger to the tip of my nose. "Gone," he said.

But I saw the grimace of pain tightening the corners of his own eyes, freezing the humor that once lived there.

Seconds after he stepped back from our last kiss I could still savor him, like a wine's finish. Within his aftertaste were two things, utter shock at a loneliness too heavy for any human to bear, and a regret to which he would never admit, the loss of his dream to build a new life in the city.

He turned toward the forest on foot.

"Landry," I cried and ran after him. "Landry!"

His trees cloaked him before I was more than a few steps into the wilderness.

"Landry!" I cried again, frantic.

I stumbled on, but I couldn't read the branches or the leaves. The oaks no longer answered me and the breeze was just a breeze. Soon an unfamiliar feeling rooted itself at the back of my neck. Fear. Like the thousands I had sent fleeing the night before, I looked at the shadows and

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primitive hysteria flowered. Landry was responsible. My power had jumped to him, leaving me without the ability to fight him.

I came to a halt in a small clearing. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't get my feet to take me deeper into the forest. He barred my way, forcing me toward escape and the bright new life his sacrifice was buying me.

In the center of the clearing stood a single white dogwood in full bloom. As I watched, the sun topped the evergreens and a ray of light reached the lonely tree.

"Landry," I said a final time.

My voice triggered a shower of white petals that floated back and forth lazily to the ground. When every last petal lay on the moss below, one of them unexpectedly fluttered up into the air. Not a petal, but a tiny bird. It flew toward me.

"I love you," it whispered as it passed.

"I feel I'm going to turn into an accountant again."

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Mary Rosenblum is the author of several sf novels: The Drylands, Chimera, *and* The Stone Garden, *as well as many short stories (some of which were collected in* Synthesis and Other Virtual Realities*). She also writes mystery novels under the name of Mary Freeman. Her current project is a science fiction novel called* Eternity Shift. *In fact, we have that novel to thank for this new story—Ms. Rosenblum says she had too much fun with the novel to stop with just one story, and this one, set several decades after the novel, spun off from the book.*

Gypsy Tail Wind

By Mary Rosenblum

ZAHARAH PUSHED THE LAST netted bundle of goods through the lock and into the steamy humidity of the Encampment. Panne/Lorenzo, her bonded partner, hated the Oort run. Most of the Miners and Traders did, but that meant profit was good, and the dyad never passed up a credit, legal or...according to the rumors kicking around Darkside...otherwise. Maybe it was the smell that kept everyone away. She wrinkled her nose. Or the *menusahkan* vines. Zaharah shoved the pale, rubbery stems out of her way one more time. Resilient, they gave her the eerie feeling that they pushed back. Hooking her leg into the tangled net of pallid green that twined through what was supposedly a docking port, she squinted, searching for welcome in the dim, green twilight. Well, this was where the ship had been instructed to mate with the Encampment hull.

A gypsy encampment. Nobody she knew had ever set foot inside one. The encampments showed up anywhere from the orbitals to the Oort. For a while. You heard all kinds of stories...fall asleep, wake up, and find out that during the night, the bubble-cluster of the Encampment had disintegrated

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into a swarm of spherical habitats and had scattered. Rumor was that miners and traders who did the falling asleep thing were never heard from again. No chance of sleeping, she thought, wrinkling her nose again. Smelled wrong, looked wrong, all sickly greens. No color, no flowers, not like the garden at the hub of New Singapore. A dozen meters away, two gypsies faced each other, one at ninety degrees to the other, neither orienting to her current version of "up," anchored to the vines with their long, prehensile toes. One of them was naked, the other wore only a pair of brief shorts.

Zaharah looked away. Growing up under the Clerics in New Singapore, she had needed some time to get used to the casual attitudes about dress among miners and finally to adopt the practical, skin-tight singlet most of them wore. She pulled a bag of juice from her waist pouch, really tempted just to be rude and *stare* as she sucked guava. Their faces moved — smiling, eyes crinkling, doing all the body language thing you did when you talked to your mate. But they didn't talk. The childlike faces, dead-white skin, and ropy, flexible limbs always put her off, even when she ran across one of them down low, in the near-Earth security of lunar Darkside. She'd heard that some crazy created them on one of the orbitals, but she'd also heard that they had come about all on their own, that their DNA was totally *Homo sapiens*. Couldn't prove it by looking at them. No wonder they'd mostly picked up and moved out here.

Zaharah swallowed the last of her juice, crumpled the bag and sailed it at what had to be the mouth of a recycle trap a few meters away. An air current caught it and its trajectory shifted. *Tidak!* It bounced off the edge of the slot and trajectoried off among the vines. One of the gypsies stretched out a long arm and snagged the crumpled plastic, flipping it back toward the trap, didn't even look. It sailed into the trap's mouth and vanished with a small slurp.

Where was the buyer Panne/Lorenzo had been so sure was on the way? Now she had to pee. She blinked her eyelid screen to life, but the dyad's link was dark. *Menusahkan*. Lazy one at that. Taking a nap, most likely. Or doing a porn virtual.

One of the gypsies had disappeared. The other — the one who had snagged her trash — give a sort of shiver and drifted gently in her direction, its momentum fading so that his face ended up less than half a meter from

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her own and oriented to her. Allah, they were good in microG. And she'd been born on the platform.

"You are very young," it said. He said. In English. Which, fortunately, she knew.

"So?" She eyed him. At least this one wore shorts. "Is there anything wrong with being young?"

"Young is a precious state of being." The gypsy smiled at her. "Once lost, it cannot be reclaimed."

She *felt* his smile, like a shaft of sunlight slanting into her brain. Huh. She'd heard they didn't talk to outsiders. But she had a high empathy rating...a nine. "*Maaf*," she said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound rude." She tilted her head, meeting those weird, milky eyes. "*Saya*.... I am Zaharah." She held out her hand...another habit she had had to learn. He touched her wrist lightly, didn't grab it. Smiled.

Her head filled suddenly with something like music and light and the colors that sparkled in droplets of water. His name? "*Terang*," she said, the Malay word for light. He lifted a shoulder, accepting. And suddenly the light-music feeling vanished and instead, her head filled with a rich swirl of crimson and purple, touched with gold and the feel of velvet through fingers. His smile widened.

His name for her? "*Fair enough.*" She laughed and wondered what laughter looked like to him...instantly saw a burst of sparkling light.

He lifted one shoulder in the universal shrug, held out a hand. "Come eat with me?"

"I can't." And she wanted to. "I have to wait for this buyer." She tilted her chin toward the netted and tethered cargo units. "He's supposed to be here..." she glanced at her eyelid screen "...an hour ago."

Another shrug. "Give me the reader."

"Why?" She blinked at him. "You can't sign for it." But he had stuck out his hand and didn't respond. Let him figure it out. She put the little retinal scanner into his hand, watched him eyeball it.

It cooed acceptance.

"You're the buyer?" Well, obviously. And he didn't react to her mix of surprise and annoyance. "Well, okay. Fine." Panne/Lorenzo had shut down, the load had been paid for...she checked her eyelid screen to make sure and yeah, Terang had uploaded the correct amount of share...and...Why

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not? Panne was there to rescue her if the Encampment decided to go walkabout. "I'd like to eat with you," she said.

He grabbed her wrist, but before she could bristle, he had pushed off and so had she, and he wasn't really towing her, but he clearly knew where every vine lay. She felt his amusement with an overtone of "young" and bristled anyway, even though he was right. She would have ended up tangled in vines before she had gone three meters. In fact, the vines gave the illusion of parting to allow them through...or was it an illusion?

It was a good thing she had a guide. The maze of partial arches, masked and hidden by the pallid, twining plants, opened one after another, everything a tangle of green. No flowers. Here and there gypsies drifted, sleeping, talking, doing things. They ignored her. Bubbles, she thought. The thousand or so individual bubble habitats that the gypsies inhabited had fused together and the arches marked the joins. Sort of like the inside of a sponge? Light seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, transmitted through the smart alloy walls from the collectors tethered to the Encampment like huge, unfurled wings? The platforms couldn't do that.

The stories of gypsy tech were maybe true.

Her new friend drifted to a perfect halt in a small open space in the tangle of vines. They weren't all the same, she noticed, saw different leaves and different shades of green, all sickly compared to what you saw in the platform gardens. They must work just like the platforms, though. Clean the water, grow the food, provide oxygen. The gypsies brought in water from the 'roids. That was mostly what Panne had unloaded. Bladders full of frozen water mined from the top of the Belt. The small load of platform-manufactured goods they had unloaded was a bonus. Color caught her eye...the first colors she had seen since unloading the sealed units from the ship.

A complex shape woven of gold and silver wire peeped from the pale leaves. Here and there, caged within the gleaming metal threads, small smooth shapes gleamed in reds, pale golds, dark green, and a blue deeper than Earth's oceans against the black of vacuum. She pushed off, drifted closer, unable to tear her gaze away. Other things glinted darkly within the twisted wire cocoon, dark bits like chips from an M-type 'roid, a dull chunk of ragged metal that looked burned. A bone? Tiny and ivory white?

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"It's...beautiful," she said. Although beautiful wasn't really the word. She'd heard of these. They brought incredible prices downside on Earth and paid for the ice and the items the gypsies sometimes up-ported from the platforms. She let her breath out slowly, filled with the same feeling she had once in a while when she looked at the distant, small fire that was Sol from the topside of the Belt or caught the blue and white arch of Earth just right from Low-Earth and realized that down there people looked up at her. Terang was watching her, she realized. At least those blind-looking eyes seemed to be fixed on her. Smiled. No, his mouth didn't move, but she felt it. Like warmth when you come back inside after working on a 'roid's surface, cold in a way that your suit can't block.

Terang reached above her, pulled a couple of small, pale oblongs like swollen fingers from the tangle of stems above her head, drifted them just right to float perfectly still in front of her. She reached for them, not at all tempted by the ugly shape and color, nibbled anyway. It was okay, sort of chewy and firm, not like any particular fruit she knew, not tasty but not really unpleasant. "Thank you," she said.

"You're the youngest partner he's had," the gypsy said in his clipped English.

He meant Panne/Lorenzo and radiated...disapproval? "Panne's not bad." She ate more of the fruit because it was rapidly satisfying her hunger. "Now, Lorenzo is a pain, a *menusahkan*. But he only shows up occasionally and I can override his control of the ship if I have to.... He had to agree to that before I'd retina the bond." She shrugged. The two halves of the dyad didn't talk to each other at all, Panne had told her. She'd never met a dyad like that before. "It's a risk, but that's why Panne has to pay so much share for a partner."

"Why?" he asked and that single spoken syllable held a wealth of questions.

"I...was in trouble." She felt herself blushing because she wasn't sure just how much Terang could read. "I don't know if you know anything about New Singapore, but it's still pretty strict, even if the Shariya law isn't really as bad as down on the planet. And I...well, I'm not very good at following rules. And Panne was loading cargo and he...sort of looked the other way when I sneaked onboard...and he could have really gotten in trouble." She ran out of breath. "Later on, he even offered to take me on

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as a partner, and I didn't have any microG mining experience at all, not really. Tell me about this." She waved the last of the fruit-thing at the arching curves that suggested vanished walls, the tangle of leaves and stems and fruit. Needing to change the subject. "Can this really just...break apart? Vanish in an instant?"

"Not in an instant." His amusement tinted the air. "Quickly." He sent her an image of walls expanding, curving like closing fingers around them, stems and leaves writhing away from the walls, cocooning them in a dense net of living plant tissue that breathed oxygen and kept them warm. Showed her a vision of the bumpy cluster of the Encampment resolving into a host of smaller parts, single spheres and small clusters that dispersed in different directions.

"How do you *do* that?"

Gap there...and whatever explanation he was offering wasn't making any sense to her. Somehow. So the stories of the gypsy's tech were true after all. Not just rumors. On Darkside they said the gypsies didn't think like real people.

Real people. She blushed, but apparently that thought hadn't translated either, or Terang didn't care. She reached for the wire sculpture, lifted the delicate construct from its nest among the leaves. The wires gleamed, thin and fragile as spider silk in her fingers, and the glinting bits of stone, glass, metal and bone seemed to attract the wan light and concentrate it. "Is this your bubble...habitat...whatever you call it?" She gestured at the small clear space where they anchored. "Do you live here?"

Blank response. He didn't understand her.

"Is this where you keep your things?"

That didn't work either. Personal space not a concept? Zaharah shook her head, thinking of the crèche on New Singapore, rolling out your mat to sleep on the floor with the other kids, eating together, someone always crying, someone always squabbling, someone always throwing up or with a dirty diaper. "I like private space." She laughed. "That's what I'm saving money for...to buy a room. On Dragon Home, I think. A lot of women from New Singapore emigrate there, and the Chinese are expanding the platform again." He didn't understand her. A floor, she thought. All to herself. Space to put...well, whatever she wanted to put there. She imagined a bed,

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a table, carpet. All to herself, and everything would still be there when she came back from being away. "Private space costs a lot," she said.

Terang pushed away from the vine he'd anchored himself to, head tilted as if listening. "You need to go," he said out loud, and a tinge of urgency tinted his words. "I'll take you back."

All the stories of the traders who never came back crowded into her head and when he reached for her wrist to guide her, she didn't feel the least bit insulted. She felt the hurry in his muscles as he guided her through the tangle of vines that seemed empty now. Where were the gypsies she had seen before? A shiver of fear brushed her neck. But ahead, she saw the netted bales that she had unloaded, just where she had left them, felt a wave of relief. They'd made it. She touched open her link. "Open up, Panne," she said.

Her eyelid screen remained blank. No response. She used her emergency link. "Panne? You sleeping? Open up." All those Darkside stories were twisting in her head, taking on new meanings. "Something's wrong," she said when he didn't respond. Fear touched her. She was a bonded partner and no one could lock the ship against her. She palmed the lock panel where the ship's smart hull had fit itself to the Encampment's smart hull, using her personal override on the lock, waiting for Panne to break in and tell her he had been asleep. The lock opened, the soft breath of familiar ship-air startling her once more with how alien the Encampment smelled. She pushed through, became aware of Terang crowding close behind her. "You are afraid," he said, before she could say anything.

And there was no reason to be afraid except that never once in all the time she'd worked with him had Panne...or Lorenzo if he had showed up...failed to greet her when she asked for the lock. "Panne?" She felt a wordless exclamation from Terang behind her...

...and fell into blackness.

She dreamed about vines that caressed her and breathed into her mouth and jungles that fractured and scattered like droplets of water, and the sound of the stars singing, and after a while it occurred to her in a moment of fuzzy lucidity that she was dreaming Terang's dreams but why she should be doing that she didn't know.

* * *

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She woke, stretched, wondered vaguely what was wrong with her hammock, why it was so constricting. Then she remembered and tensed, pushing at the webbing, blinking in the ship light, struggling to bring the *here* and *now* into focus. Her head ached, throbbing to the beat of her pulse, and her eyes felt gummy. Panne hunched in front of the control holo, shoulders tight, gloved hands dancing amongst the icons. The crimson fiberlight tracery decorating his scalp glowed and she realized blearily that they must be on emergency power.

Not Panne. Her stomach clenched as she recognized the familiar tightness in his unselected Gallic face, the subtle changes in muscle tension that gave it away.

Lorenzo. The other half of the dyad.

"What is going on?" She struggled to free herself from her hammock, realizing fuzzily that it had been secured, imprisoning her. "Lorenzo, let me out."

"Keep your voice down." Lorenzo slapped his hand through the icons, scattering them. They coalesced behind his angry swipe. Lots of red among them. Bad. "They're hunting for us," he hissed. "They're listening."

"Who's hunting?" And she didn't bother to keep her voice down because they didn't need to worry about sound. This was a miner-ship and an old one and leaked all kinds of signature. "Let me *out*. Now! And tell me what's going on."

Lorenzo pushed over to her, sweating fear, fumbling with the webbing.

"What happened?" She stripped the webbing away, untangling herself with difficulty. "What did you do, hit me with a stunner when I cleared the hull?"

"Keep your *voice* down. It's Tai Lan and his crew. And it was just a drug patch. Hibernation." Lorenzo swung back to the icons. "He already hit us once. Took out the main mirrors. We had just enough steam to duck into this hole on an M'roid."

She linked to the ship's archive, scanning recent commands. He was right. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Raging, she checked damage control, afraid, too, because Tai Lan was one of the worst pirates out here. He wanted the ship, he wanted the cargo. The crew went out the locks. No negotiation

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ever. "We're empty. What do we have that Tai wants? The ship's not worth that much," she snarled, running the stats for the mirror over again, hoping for some kind of inspiration. None. They needed full mirror-capacity to maneuver with any kind of speed. This was a miner. They didn't need speed. Usually. That was why the miners hated the Oort run. It paid well, but this far out, the solar energy to melt ice into steam to power the ship was pretty thin.

She called up an external view on her eyelid screens. Quite a few ship-eyes were down, but obviously Lorenzo had put them into a deep crater. To get out, they'd have to use the storage cells to generate maneuvering steam just to get up to where they could unfurl their mirrors...and he was right. Two-thirds of their mirrors were so much junk. They'd be lucky if they could limp home.

"I can't believe Tai Lan is chasing us." She blinked the depressing screens away. "He doesn't waste his time...." She broke off. Cursed softly in Malay. Terang, bound with webbing, was anchored to a wall, eyes closed, dead or unconscious. "Allah's beard, Lorenzo, what have you *done*?"

"Nobody goes wandering around in the Encampment." Lorenzo cackled. "The gypsies don't come waltzing onto anyone's ship. You're just special, sweet cheeks. But I knew that. High e rating. The gypsies go for that, you know. They can talk to you easy, I guess."

"I don't know why Panne hasn't had the laser jockeys permanently erase you." She pushed off hard, arrowed across the confined space, spilling her momentum with a slap of her palms against the hull next to Terang. Drugged, she guessed, just as she had been. Probably the same hibernation drug that automatically injected when you had to bail out in a lifeboat pod. Those *had* been his dreams, then. "You kidnapped him."

"Not at all, sweet cheeks." Lorenzo blew her a kiss. "Bounty hit." He snapped his fingers, talking in a normal tone now, Tai Lan obviously forgotten for the moment as he gloated. "I got his description right here."

"You got the wrong person."

"How could I know?" He beamed at her. "They all look alike and they're not chipped. You just gotta guess. And I don't think the contractor really cares...you know what I mean? As to that comment of yours — " His eyes had turned to chips of black ice. " — don't believe everything Panne

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tells you, sweet cheeks. We get along for a reason. I figure the angles he doesn't because he's a wimp. And they pay off. Any fish bites if you got good bait...," he warbled off key. "And I'm never there when they ask questions, if you get me. Panne, he's pure as distilled water. He never knows what we've been up to. He just collects the payoff and passes the truth-scans with flying colors. Now we just need to get out of this in one piece. Don't worry. You get a share of the bounty. It's not in your bond, but hey, we're fair."

Zaharah stared at him, chilled. Oh, she'd heard the rumors. About the price for gypsies, because some people wanted to wring their tech out of them. Only gypsies, isolated out in the Oort, were not easy to come by, and since they could read minds, it was dangerous to try. The price was supposed to be very high. All of a sudden, a lot of things made sense. Like why Panne had taken on someone as young and inexperienced as she. Who just happened to have the high e rating that gypsies liked.... Yeah, Lorenzo was a pain, but there were plenty of people who'd take on a pain in turn for the amount of share Panne/Lorenzo offered.

Unless he had offered it only to her. No wonder she hadn't seen much of Lorenzo.

Bait. She should have listened to the warnings in Darkside. Hubris, she thought. Lorenzo was smirking as if he were the mind reader. She closed her eyes, struggling for calm. "I think I'll just sit here." She let all the bitterness she was feeling color her words. "And I'll let Tai Lan find us. Why not?"

"Because you'll die." He smirked at her. "And you don't really want to die. And your gypsy will die, too. And yeah, Panne and I will, too, but that won't really be vengeance, will it? Just kind of a game-over, eh? And I don't think you're a game-over kind of girl. If you were, you'd be in the Clerics' prison back on the platform." He grinned, the crystal implants in his teeth flashing like bits of star. "It's only a gypsy. Not even you can think they're really human. You're from New Singapore. They're not even allowed to live on the platform."

That was the Clerics' doing. It had everything to do with their version of Allah and nothing to do with her. Time to start thinking. She sighed, giving her head a thoughtful tilt, lifting one shoulder just a hair, not really enough to agree with him, but just enough to suggest she was looking at

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the situation with new eyes. While she hadn't seen much of Lorenzo, he hadn't seen much of her, either. Put on a considering face.

"Let's just get out of here," she said, finally. Letting her shoulder hold that hint of an "I agree" lift. "Then we'll talk about who is going to do what."

"Sounds like a plan." Lorenzo flashed all his teeth at her. "Your plan, rather. Which is...?"

"After we duck Tai Lan, we take the gypsy back to the Encampment." She glared at him. "Yes, or I don't do anything."

"You'd really die for *that*?" He jerked a chin toward Terang.

"Yes." She played the role of naïve child, scalded with shame as he accepted it. What they had thought of her.... But then, they'd been right, yes? So far, at least. She waited as Lorenzo put on a show of considering her stand, agreeing with it. Reluctantly.

"I can't believe you'd throw away that much share, but I don't want to die." He pouted. "Just get us out of here."

"There's one way." She sighed. "Tai Lan's ship is really strong on detecting acceleration but doesn't do visuals. He spends his money on high level weaponry instead." All lies, but Lorenzo spent most of his time in whatever box Panne kept him in. She said a prayer to Allah if he was really out there, that this wasn't something Lorenzo knew. That they really didn't talk to each other. Suppressed a surge of relief as he nodded knowingly, casually anchored to the hammock in front of the control field with a couple of fingers hooked through the mesh.

"We sneak up out of our hidey hole ever so slow and look around. We wait until we've got rock between his ship and us and then we back up against a drifting rock, use our storage cells to power a good shove, and send it off. While he's chasing that, we drift oh-so-gently away."

"Lame." He laughed and her heart sank. "Soon as he visuals the rock, he'll backtrack on the trajectory and there we are."

"No." She gave him a genuine smile. Because he was *buying* it. "He figures we tore out of here and goes looking for us. By the time he realizes he's not going to find us and comes back, we'll have changed trajectory so many times that he won't be able to find us and he'll know it. He's not stupid. Without a top AI to sift through visual data, it's like looking for a planet in a galaxy. He spends his share on other hardware, so he'll figure

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he can catch us heading in to Darkside and go watch for our acceleration signature." She drew a deep breath. "But we're going to go out, first. Find a miner and come down with that ship." Held that breath, praying, because this whole story was so lame that a five-year-old could see though it. You weren't a pirate out here unless you carried what you needed to find ships efficiently and deal with them efficiently.

But Panne had to keep Lorenzo shut up pretty tight if he was going to pass the brain scans that let him remain "innocent" when he was under suspicion. Now she understood why he'd never been convicted of any of the illegal things rumor had it that he'd done.

"So how do I do it?" Lorenzo snapped. "Fast, before he figures out where we are."

"I have to do this, I can't relay through you. You're no good with the ship, Panne told me. He set up a tight link for me and we need every nanosecond that will buy us." Pure vacuum-speak, and for a moment, she thought he was going to refuse, but Tai Lan scared him.

"Play any games and I'll put you out the lock," he snarled.

"If I play any games, we'll all be dead, remember?" She leaned into the bio-scan hood, stared at the blue target as the ship scoped retinal, bio-electrics, brain-wave patterns. Chimed acceptance. She had the controls. Clearly Lorenzo didn't know about her override. Not that he couldn't simply overpower her and take the ship back by default. She spread her hands, wakening a host of glittering icons as the field shifted to her personal mode, swept control icons into order, aware that Lorenzo was watching her intently, paranoid that he was. He had let go of the control hammock, drifted immediately behind her. She touched the hull with one toe, edged herself into a nearly imperceptible drift toward the control hammock, felt his attention focus on her movement and had to give it up.

Damn.

Well, time to throw the dice and pray to Allah. If He had any time to spare from the Clerics. At least Terang was anchored. She hovered one fingertip over a tiny green star, the start-icon for the sequence she'd lined up. All the while she had been stalling, playing with colored icons, the power cells had been melting ice, generating steam, building up emergency pressure in the acceleration chamber. None of the usual red showed

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in her galaxy of icons. She had suppressed all warning codes, but felt the faint shiver of the building pressure. Said her prayer. Touched the star.

The ship leaped away from the sheltering 'roid at full emergency acceleration, steam jets hitting rock, pushing with enormous force.

Everything in the cabin hurtled toward the far wall. Zaharah grabbed for the webbing, hung on briefly, heard Lorenzo hit the hull with a meaty thud and a hoarse cry. Then the jets reversed, and the ship slowed like a ball on an elastic tether, then zoomed back down to stop at precisely the same location where it had rested. The acceleration wasn't so fierce...no rock to push against...but it was nearly enough to rip her weakening grip from the hammock webbing. Then Lorenzo hit her, tore her loose, and she had a second of seeing the hull coming at her fast before she hit....

SHE WASN'T OUT long. Allah had clearly listened to that much of her prayer. She found herself drifting slowly toward the control field, reached for the hammock webbing and sucked in a gasp as white lightning lanced down her arm into her fingertips. Breathing fast and shallow, she snagged the webbing with the fingertips of her other hand. Trying not to move anything on the left side of her body. Her vision tunneled briefly. Broken arm? Shoulder? Ribs? She hooked a toe into the webbing so that she wouldn't drift away, feebly stabbed at the icons, trying to shut out the pain. Got the storage cells shut down...not enough power now to limp home...gonna have to depend on the mirrors and pray again that they were really operable. But Tai Lan was probably on the way right now, had most likely spotted her little maneuver. If so, it wouldn't really matter.

Lorenzo floated a half meter away, bruise darkening the side of his face. Breathing. Not conscious. He didn't look damaged in any way. She spat one soft and very rude word in Malay. Her shoulder was broken...she could feel the bone grind when she moved and the pain stopped her breath briefly. Arm looked okay.... Took a deep breath to prepare herself. If she got Lorenzo into an escape pod before he came to, she could keep him out, in hibernation, all the way home.

It was going to hurt. A lot. She nudged herself across the cabin, trying not to move her damaged shoulder. Paused for a few heartbeats to breathe and wait for her vision to clear, then palmed the emergency lock. The hull

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melted open to reveal the padded cocoons of the pods. Thank Allah for micro gravity. She wanted to move Lorenzo slowly and very very carefully, but his faint moan as she positioned herself blew that option. Planting her foot against the hull she pushed him into motion toward the pod opening, all coherent thought banished by the icy white agony it cost her. It took a moderate eternity to get him positioned in the padded space, to pull the webbing across him one-handed. She had to keep stopping to pant, to wait for the darkness to clear from her vision. If her stomach hadn't been empty she would have vomited, but finally, finally, Allah be praised, she got him into the pod. With the last ounce of her strength she activated the pod, watched the tiny twin bio-catheters snake into the artery and vein in his throat, saw the tension of returning consciousness drain from his face.

Safe. She put the unit on stand-by and manual eject mode, wanting only to let go, pass out. Touched up an injector of hibernation antidote from the bio center. A painkiller helped, but not much. No way to make the pain go away if she wanted to function. Her vision was tunneling again and she started to shiver. Shock? Pushed off to drift across the cabin. Get Terang awake...maybe Tai Lan had missed them.

He had not.

A bouquet of red blossomed in the control field and the port section of the hull began to shimmer, about to thin and open. Someone had overridden the ship's hull lock.

He wouldn't do vacuum. Not if he was after Terang. Zaharah's thoughts blurred. Weapon.... She tried to toe off the hull, change her trajectory to grab one of the lethal-grade stunners on board, missed her push and hit the hull with her bad shoulder. She heard her voice crying out, saw the hull thin and open, felt one moment of bitterness at the unfairness of it all.

She dreamed that Allah was speaking to her, but not in words. Why would a god use words anyway, she wondered, or one language over another? Not that she was about to say that to the Clerics. She was in enough trouble with them as it was. But Allah was judging Lorenzo, pointed a huge disembodied finger and the void of vacuum loomed before him.

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No, she said, tugging at Allah. *He's not the whole man. Panne has done good things. He didn't have to help me. Yes, he used me later, but he didn't get anything when he let me stow away and he might have ended up in prison with me.* The Clerics would be horrified...a woman speaking to Allah like that. But Allah considered and asked her why not, when he had stolen Terang. Allah knew Terang's real name, but a god would, wouldn't it? Zaharah had no words to express her reasons...only the feeling that it was an unbalanced thing to do. Surely Allah would not be unfair, but then the universe was not a fair place and people died all the time who should not and perhaps the Clerics were right and that was all at Allah's will. It...disappointed her. That a god would be no more than the Clerics made him out to be. Allah laughed, and it occurred to her that she should fear a god's laughter, but she felt no fear, only amusement and an oddly familiar sense of warmth, like the feel of a smile. Then she was dreaming that she slept among plants and they rooted in her flesh. It didn't hurt; in fact the sensation of their tiny rootlets burrowing through muscles and wrapping around her bones was almost pleasant. She should hurt, she thought, and wondered why she did not, although she couldn't quite recall why she thought she should hurt in the first place. Slowly, vague memories surfaced, focused into Lorenzo's face, Terang's bound and hibernating form, Tai Lan....

She woke. Struggling. Bracing herself for the agony of her fractured shoulder and the realization that Tai Lan had boarded and if she was not dead already that was perhaps not a good thing. Pale vines wrapped her, immobilized her. She opened her mouth to scream, dream and waking blending horribly, but a sudden calm filled her mind, drowning her instant of terror.

It's all right. You're safe.

She wasn't sure if she heard the words or simply converted understanding into words. "Terang?" She recognized it now, the humid, alien smell of the encampment. Wondered for a moment if it had all been a dream, but a twinge from her shoulder and a slight stiffness as she moved her arm suggested otherwise. She realized suddenly that she was naked, completely tangled in slender, pale vines. But even as she realized it, they writhed away, coiling back into pearly knots, releasing her.

She was cold. Terang drifted near her, radiating his smile, her singlet

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in his hand. He held it out and she took it, too stunned to even feel shame at her nakedness. The motion set her drifting gently. "How did we get here?"

Her mind filled with a galaxy of matte-black bubbles drifting across the panorama of distant suns, of a large, weaponed ship heading sunward, fast. The Encampment had followed Terang. And Tai Lan had fled? Zaharah shivered because that said a lot for the Encampment's weaponry. Not much frightened Tai Lan. The stories of disappearances suddenly took on new meaning. As did the fact that nobody had yet figured out how the gypsy bio-tech worked. "What happened to Panne/Lorenzo?" She realized she was simply holding her singlet, blushed deeply, and struggled into it. "Is he...still in the pod?" She imagined the open pod, his unconscious form.

Terang lifted one shoulder. Thoughtful. "You asked for that," he said out loud.

The Allah dream. What would the Clerics say about her choice of Allah? She stifled an urge to giggle, realized just how weak she was. And wondered if her dream about plant roots growing into her flesh was equally real. Shivered. "What now?" she asked.

He didn't understand.

"Will you just let us go?"

No answer. Did that mean yes? He held out his hand and she let him seize her wrist, and this time let him tow her through the tangled maze of the Encampment. The space seemed full of gypsies this time — sleeping, eating, doing whatever they were doing. As if they had hidden from her on her earlier visit and didn't bother to do so now. Some of them acknowledged her with a touch that felt casual and friendly. Others paid no attention. They reached an area of empty space like the one where she had originally unloaded their cargo, nothing to show whether it was the same or simply like the one they had docked to earlier. Light spilled from a small oval in the hull of the Encampment and she recognized the inside of the ship, could even see Panne/Lorenzo dreaming in his open pod.

"How did they find you?" She hesitated this side of the lock, studied his milky eyes, bathed by the warmth of his smile. "How did they know?"

"I wasn't shut away." Terang said the words out loud. "The drugs he

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used don't do that to us." Pushed off to drift precisely over to a small knot of vines that writhed across the hull. Light glittered in his hands as he arrowed back to her. Zaharah stared at the small cyclone of hair-thin wire wound around a spiral of tiny, gleaming stones. The stones drew her eye, made her think of a distant spiral galaxy, filled her with a vast sense of *completeness*.

"You can sell it and buy your private space that means so much to you," Terang said, still speaking out loud.

She could buy a ship with it. Not a new one or a big one, but an old steam-trainer with a good maintenance history and sound hardware. He was waiting for her to leave. "Thank you," she said out loud, saying a lot more that didn't translate. "I would like to come back. Some day. If I can find you. If it's all right."

She recognized the slivery shimmer in her mind, like the tiny bubbles in expensive and illegal champagne. He was laughing.

"Just call," he said out loud. "Try it."

She blinked her eyelid screen into life first, thinking that he meant they had implanted some kind of comm link while she was healing, but nothing new showed among the usual icons. Try it. How? She imagined herself calling his name, not the Malay word she spoke aloud, but the sound/texture/image of *light*.

Sucked in a quick breath as she felt a focused instant of vast *attention*. "I see," she gasped. The whole Encampment had answered? Felt a stab of regret that she had to leave, because even if she bought a ship, it might be a long time before she could find her way back out to the Oort. But if Panne spent too much time in hibernation, brain damage would begin to occur. Impulsively she pushed closer, touched Terang's strange, other-than-human face lightly with her fingertips, felt his long, slender fingers on her own cheeks. *Good-bye,* she said without words.

They let go and pushed off at the same instant, and she arrowed into the ship, the sculpture in her hands, trailing sparkling droplets of tears. The hull sealed behind her and she brought up the control field. The mirrors were whole. Repaired by the gypsies? She blinked, wondering how long she had dreamed in the vines' embrace. Used the recharged power cells to push them gently away from the Encampment, and when she had attained enough distance, she unfurled the mirrors to their full capacity.

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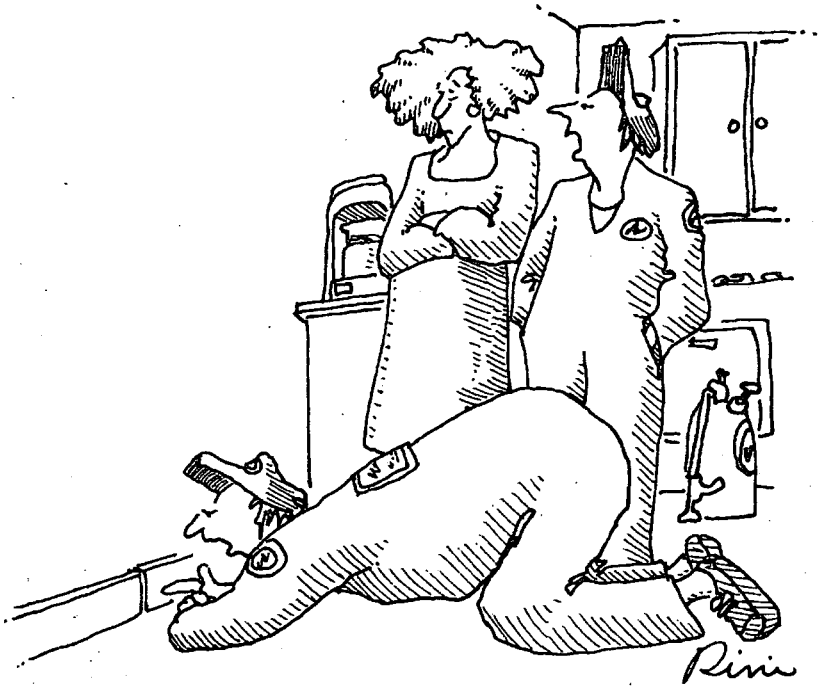
A trickle of steam began to push her, taking her down the vast gravity well to the Belt, Darkside, and the platforms.

She'd wake Panne when they closed on Darkside, blackmail him with the evidence she'd copy from the ship's navigation log. She might end up with a penal labor contract and wearing a collar, too, if she actually had to use the evidence, but she was willing to bet he would cave and get rid of Lorenzo finally and for good. And then she was through with him, all debts paid, free and clear.

She felt a brief touch from Terang. Not good-bye, precisely. You could translate it as "later," she decided. And smiled. ☙



"He's a roach-whisperer. It's not really pest control. It's more like mentoring."

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Mike Shultz made his debut in our pages just last month with "Old as Books." Now he brings us something very different, a delightful literary banquet that, like so many satisfying meals, both leaves us full and makes us look forward to the chef's next concoction.

Refried Clichés: A Five-Course Meal

By Mike Shultz

APERITIF
Served in a Battered Brass Decanter

LESTER RUBBED THE LAMP three times.

The genie popped out, already blabbering.

"Greetings, mortal. I am Jafaar al'Brazier, here to grant you three wishes. The rules are as follows: No wishing for wishes. No rephrasing a wish after — "

"Wish number one," Lester cut in. "No rules."

The genie's jaw dropped.

"Lester, that's very dangerous. You might — "

"Wish number two. Interpret my wishes as I so choose."

The shocked look on the genie's face grew to superhuman proportions.

"Hey, you can't — "

"Three." Lester had been saving this idea from science class for years.

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"A mole more wishes. That's 6.02×10^{23}, if you don't know."

The genie paused, putting a finger to his mouth.

"Nobody ever did this before." A slow grin spread across his face. "Dude! This could be fun! Do you mind sharing a few?"

SALAD

Romaine Leaves Large Enough to Make A Skirt Out of, Topped With Slices of Apple

Adam Pherstman and Evelyn Childs worked like the devil to keep *Darwin's Hope*, the Federation's Multiverse-Class Colony Ship, from crashing into the planet below, but the accident left the ship's systems in tatters. They ran for the Ejecto-Pod as the ship plummeted into the blue and white sphere below.

They were the last survivors. Seconds after they ejected, *Darwin's Hope* crashed into a barren region that, according to the Quantum Flux Possible Future Predictor, could one day be called Arizona, or possibly Roswell. It made quite a crater.

The Pod landed halfway around the planet at the confluence of three rivers. Adam and Evelyn stepped out hand in hand (the ordeal had brought them quite close together) into a lush green garden. Finding it hot compared to home, they removed their clothing and went off to explore.

The garden was wonderful. The only trouble came when Adam climbed a tree to pick some fruit — a talking snake bit him. Luckily, Eve spotted it slithering away and vaporized it with her Phase Blaster. They had a moment of friction when Adam returned to the Pod and refused to let her help him treat his wound; he came back out looking paler than normal, but claimed he was okay.

That evening, they cuddled up next to a fire.

"Let's just stay here and have lots and lots of kids," Eve said, a starry look in her eyes.

Adam frowned. "Ah, Eve — "

"Just think!" Eve went on. "We might populate this whole world!"

"There's only one problem," Adam said with a gulp. "That snake today...well...he kind of bit me in a bad place."

Eve's eyes widened. "You mean — "

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Adam pulled out the Quantum Predictor, hit a few buttons, and showed her the screen.

YOU GUYS SURE SCREWED THAT ONE UP, it read.

ENTRÉE
Roasted White Meat, Prepared on a Spit

Dr. Jules landed himself in quite a pickle when he jumped back to ancient Central America in the Company's Quantum Flux Time Machine. He nearly tricked the Maya out of all their gold, trading it for Bic lighters and Cheez Whiz, when he made the mistake of shaking the chief's hand. Next thing he knew he was tied to a sacrificial altar. Jules was terrified.

But his MicroGizmo™ watch saved the day, piping up to inform him of the impending lunar eclipse.

"You kill me and I'll steal the moon!" he shouted at the chief, who understood him thanks to Jules's Phase Inversion Language Translator.

The chief frowned and consulted with his high priests. Finally, he turned back to Jules and untied the ropes.

"We thought you were Quetzlcoatl," the chief said, grinning sheepishly. "We were going to sacrifice you and steal your powers. But you don't even know that lunar eclipses are caused by the occultation of the Moon by the Earth. You're not a god." The chief turned to one of the priests. "Start the fire! We're having him for dinner!"

SIDE DISH
Steamed Rutabagas Served in a Hollowed Skull

Olric stifled a yawn as he swung his two-handed vorpal sword one-handed through the necks of another dozen goblins. The army around him dwindled rapidly. He saw the Goblin King, Groog, approaching proudly but fearfully on his horse, and rolled his eyes, meanwhile slaughtering another hundred goblins. Groog drew near and dismounted.

"Enough!" Groog boomed. "I've had it!"

Olric looked around. The remaining goblins quieted and lowered their weapons.

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"Olric, I quit," Groog said, throwing down his battleaxe. "This isn't fun anymore. You always win."

"Oh, come on!" Olric whined. "This has been..." He struggled for a word. "Challenging?"

"No. I'm finished. No more wars." Groog turned on his heel as if to walk away.

"Wait!" Olric looked around, frantic. "I'll...I'll take off my armor. See?" He shucked his magical plate mail (very easy to remove) and tossed it aside.

Groog looked at him askance. "Nah," he said, waving Olric off.

"Okay, uh...I'll put down my vorpal sword!" He threw it at his feet.

Groog raised an eyebrow. "Your prophylactic of protection plus nine?"

Olric reddened. "Fine." He slipped it off and tossed it away. "Now, fight me!"

"No." Groog signaled to a goblin behind Olric, who fired his readied crossbow. The bolt sank into Olric's back. "But my lieutenant will."

Olric stumbled to the ground. Groog picked up the vorpal sword and finished the job.

"Works every time," Groog said.

DESSERT
Mincemeat Pie, Still Warm

The beautiful and voluptuous special agent Jane Craft clung to the helicopter's skid with one arm and glared up at the pilot, the Arch-Evil Doctor Shovanyst. He was a goner, now. She swung her MP5 submachine gun toward him.

"I know you're the one who gassed London!" Jane shouted. "Now you'll pay!"

"I might as well confess," Shovanyst said. "You're dead anyway."

He jerked the controls. Jane's MP5 went flying as she struggled to keep her grip. Shovanyst cackled madly and veered off toward Paris.

Undaunted, Jane did a knee-hang from the skid, silently thanking her MI-6 gymnastics instructor, and pulled her Beretta 70S from her ankle holster. Then she shimmied back to the cockpit opening.

"Still with us?" Shovanyst said.

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He rolled the helicopter upside-down, an impossible feat but for the ingenious modifications he'd made to the craft. Jane toppled sideways but snagged the skid once more. Her Beretta plummeted to the ground.

"Phew," Jane said. "Close one." She crouched on the upside-down rail, trying not to look into the spinning rotors below.

"Really glad I took those gymnastics classes," she said to herself as she pulled out a .44 Auto-Mag from the holster at the small of her back. Jane aimed at Doctor Shovanyst and pulled the trigger.

The gun's kick knocked her off balance; if not for her large breasts adding to her instability, she might have recovered. Jane fell, but not far.

The rotors carved her into tiny bits.

SWEET DREAMS WITH A FULL BELLY
Marred by a Touch of Indigestion

The succubus had Donald tied to the bed. When he laid eyes on her, sweet blissful anticipation filled him, but when their bodies touched, it was hot coals and burning needles in places where coals and needles weren't meant to go. He sobbed and begged her to stop, but on it went for hours.

"Wait," Donald said, panting, as they cycled into another phase of blissful anticipation. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Temptation," the succubus growled in her sultry voice. "Sin. Keeping you out of heaven."

"Look, honey. I drink, smoke, cheat on my taxes, cheat on my wife.... I'm already going to hell. You're wasting your time."

The succubus sat back on the bed, a pout on her face. "Fine. Be that way. I hate this job, anyway."

"Now, now," Donald cooed, switching on the charm that had won him a dozen mistresses. "Why don't you untie me, skip the hot coals, and we do this just for fun?"

The succubus grinned a toothy grin. Donald's blissful anticipation rose to gargantuan heights as the sulfurous smell in the air diminished and she untied him. He shuddered with delight as their bodies came together....

They heard his screams all the way down to the 663rd layer of the abyss.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

CURSE OF THE DEADLY SEQUEL

THE FIRST OF the new wave of Asian horror films (quietly suspenseful pictures that owe more to European cinema than to Wes Craven or George A. Romero) that attracted attention on these shores was Hideo Nakata's *Ringu*. Based on a novel by Kôji Suzuki, the Stephen King of Japan, the story concerns a videotape that causes the death of anyone who watches it exactly seven days after the viewing. It was subsequently remade in the United States by Gore Verbinski (*The Mexican*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*) and entitled *The Ring*. The plots of the two films are virtually identical. They each begin with a couple of high school girls talking about the tape — one admits to having seen it seven days previously. Before the evening is over, she dies in terror and her friend is so traumatized that she's committed to an asylum. The dead girl's aunt, a journalist, investigates her niece's death, and, after watching the tape herself, she discovers that the urban legend is real — when her young son also watches the tape, she is driven to find out what produced it in hopes that she can save him.

Despite their similarities, the differences between the two films are profound. *Ringu* has no musical soundtrack; eschews that tried-and-true tactic of horror films, the jump-scare; utilizes simple camera movement, foregoes the use of lens filters, and generates suspense that builds throughout. On the other hand, *The Ring* sports a hyper-dramatic soundtrack; relies heavily on camera technology, posing a David Fincher-scape of incessant rain and dingy interiors shot in crepuscular whites and gas chamber greens, a color scheme that virtually screams

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to watch out for an imminent jump-scare; and yet succeeds in generating surprisingly little suspense. *Ringu*, though by no means the best of the Asian new wave, is the leaner, more organic film, peaks in a shocking climax, and seems to signal, at the least, the emergence of a variant sensibility in the realm of horror cinema. *The Ring*, despite superior acting (Naomi Watts as the aunt), and despite (for much its duration) being a scene-by-scene remake, is mechanical, predictable, and not very scary. We might say by way of summing up that *Ringu* is creepy and that *The Ring* evokes another word beginning with the letters "cr..." and ending in "...py."

The images on the deadly tape that provoke the curse have a natural feel in *Ringu*, flurried and erratic; this by contrast to the tape in the remake, whose imagery is slickly nasty, reminiscent of a Goth music video. These images are imprinted on the tape by the spirit of a dead girl named Sadako in *Ringu*, Samara in *The Ring*. She was murdered by her psychotic adoptive mother, pushed down a well, where she survived for a time, but eventually succumbed. Even before her death, however, she was adept at projecting images onto surfaces — that talent precipitated her adoptive mother's madness. The reasons why Sadako's spirit has such a heartfelt grudge against the whole world are left murky, but from the Japanese film we derive a sense of the awful loneliness she experienced at the bottom of the well, and we are also given to understand that her spirit has been appropriated by a demon. In the American version, we are left with the impression that Samara was merely a troubled young girl.

Ringu spawned a sequel — two sequels, in fact — and thus it stood to reason that *The Ring* would be sequelized. The initial director assigned to *The Ring Two* was Noam Murro, whose only previous directing experience was in commercials. He dropped out of the project, citing creative differences with DreamWorks.

Creative differences?

Creative differences are to breaking movie contracts as irreconcilable differences are to breaking marriages, a blanket excuse that covers a multitude of sins. The chances are that Noam's trailer wasn't to his liking or that the catering was subpar...or do you suppose it could have had something to do with the movie? Like, for instance, an incompetent script? What are the odds? At any rate, to compensate for the loss of their *auteur*,

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DreamWorks decided to hire Hideo Nakata himself to shoot the sequel.

Sounds like a great idea...right?

To my knowledge, there have been three instances of foreign directors hired by Hollywood to remake their own work. There may have been more, but these three are enough to contemplate. Dutch director George Sluizer was brought over to remake his suspense film, *Spoorloos* as *The Vanishing*; Danish director Ole Born3dahl remade his thriller, *Nattevagten*, as *Nightwatch*; and Takashi Shimazu remade his horror movie, *Ju On* as *The Grudge*. *The Grudge* was the most successful of these, mainly because the original was a muddled, derivative mess and, though the remake didn't improve on it, neither was it significantly worse. Bornedahl's original film, which was a major influence on David Fincher's *Seven*, was a taut, restrained, terrifying thriller, telling of a student serving as the night watchman in a morgue who becomes the target of a serial killer. *Nightwatch* is almost a shot-for-shot remake, but the hammy acting, particularly the performances of Nick Nolte and Josh Brolin, and the clumsy script, a collaboration between Bornedahl and Steven Soderbergh (who doubtless added the clumsiness), reduced the film to a juvenile exercise in freakery. As for *Spoorloos*, in its Hollywood incarnation all that remains of one of the classic nightmares of European cinema — a picture with a brutally bleak ending, the story of a man obsessed by what might have happened to his girlfriend, who vanished several years before — is a watered-down, nearly comedic failure featuring a bewigged, mumbling Jeff Bridges as the villain, bidding a final farewell to his leading man status. The original ending was deemed too harsh for the delicate American psyche and was rewritten to incorporate the redemption of love, just deserts for everyone, and a heaping helping of family values. We can conclude from these examples that foreign directors are not encouraged to remake their movies in America, not when they are good movies, but are directed to lobotomize them, reducing their work to the level of a fifth-rate imitation. The task confronting Nakata, then, would appear hopeless...except for one thing. *The Ring Two* bears scant similarity to *Ringu 2*; it is a remake in name only and Nakata has been contracted to make a drastically different movie, one featuring some of the characters

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and situations that figured in his Japanese language films.

So might there be a ray of hope?

A sliver, maybe?

Well...no.

The Ring Two begins six months after the events of the previous film, and if you haven't seen *The Ring*, don't bother with this one, because you probably won't understand what's going on... though, upon reflection, perhaps a lack of understanding might improve the viewing experience. Having saved her own life and that of her son Aidan (David Dorfman) by making a copy of the tape, getting someone else to watch it, thus imperiling them.... Yup, that's how it's done. In *Ringu*, you don't notice so much how stupid this is, borne along by the film's energy. At any rate, having accomplished all that, Rachel Keller (Watts) is looking for a fresh start, trying to put her memories of Samara and the tape behind her. She and Aidan have relocated to Astoria, a picturesque town on the Oregon coast, where she has secured a job with the local newspaper, working with editor Max Rourke (Simon Baker). Shortly after the move, she hears about the death of a teenage boy that sounds suspiciously like the deaths caused by the tape: a flooded crime scene, a traumatized witness, an aghast corpse. One look at the victim's face convinces her that Samara is up to her old tricks. She breaks into the dead boy's house, finds the tape, and destroys it. But Samara comes after Aidan, assaults him while he's taking a bath and leaves him bruised and hypothermic. No longer interested in vengeance, she wants to possess him. At the hospital, Rachel is accused of child abuse and forbidden to see Aidan until she talks to the resident psychiatrist, something she feels would be a waste of time. Instead, she drives to the home of Samara's adoptive parents (both suicides) in northern Washington, hoping to uncover something that will help her stop Samara. With the help of a real estate salesman (Gary Cole in a cameo), she finds a scrapbook containing a photograph of Samara's birth mother, Evelyn (Sissy Spacek in another cameo), and tracks her down in an asylum. While there, she learns that Emily tried to drown Samara when she was a baby. Meanwhile, Aidan, now possessed by Samara's spirit, persuades the psychiatrist to kill herself and strolls out of the hospital. He's going home to wait for his/her mommy.

Early on in the movie, there is a scene involving a herd of possessed deer who attack and nearly total

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Rachel's car. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but that's scarcely a problem in a film with as many logical gaffes as this one, or one with so many improbabilities: a small town weekly with a news desk that remains open late at night; key witnesses that are left unsecured and accessible to the press in a station house; a child walks out of a hospital and the police neglect to check for him at his home; etc., etc., etc. What's pertinent about the deer scene is its effectiveness — it has a startling dynamic quality that sets it apart from all the other scenes, which are startlingly undynamic, and one has to wonder if this was the only scene over which Nakata had control. You have to speculate that this was the case because the rest of the movie is so poorly mounted, it's painful to watch.

I mean, literally painful.

From the screeching dissonances in the soundtrack, the innumerable sloppy edits, and a ludicrous succession of jump-scares (the bulk of the movie seems to be filler designed to connect them), I developed a splitting headache that is with me still as I write this review. Whatever the explanation (I imagine it's possible there is none, that the scene with the deer was the product of chance, an act of divine intervention, a scripting error), that scene towers above the tired, predictable slog that comprises the remainder of *The Ring Two* like a lighthouse above a lonely cliff, bringing its lamps to bear on the ugly rocks that surround it.

One such rock is the acting. Watts, usually a fine actress, imbues her performance with all the perky vitality of an indentured servant who, after a long day of drudgery, is anticipating the onerous sexual advances of her lord and master, the Marquis. She appears loath to touch young Aidan and her spoken endearments suggest a certain distracted character — perhaps she's thinking about firing her agent. Only when she delivers the movie's angry tagline does she convince, and then one has the sense that her anger is directed less at Samara than at the folks behind the camera. As for Aidan, or rather David Dorfman, he spends the first half of the movie doing a spot-on imitation of Haley Joel Osment in *The Sixth Sense*, and the second half of it wearing lip gloss, this to cement the impression (I suppose) that he has been possessed by a girl. But don't blame the actors for this incoherent, uninvolving disaster. The actual villain of the piece is the guy who held a gun to Nakata's head while

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they shot the movie...I'm cutting Nakata a break here by assuming he didn't run joyfully into the arms of hackdom.

Avoid this movie at any cost. It has a toxic level of stupidity and it's not even cheesy fun. When the DVD arrives from Netflix or Blockbuster, leave it in its sleeve. And should you watch it, please make a copy for an enemy and have them view it immediately. You don't want to take the chance that the DVD operates along the lines of the tape that is central to its plot, because I doubt very much you'll be given anywhere near seven days' grace before the curse takes effect.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

EVEN AT THIS LATE DATE, our next issue is uncertain, but we believe that when you take the lid off the September issue you'll find David Gerrold's "A Quantum Bit Exists in Two States" inside. Whether or not this particular cat is still purring when you look in on it remains to be seen.

Other stories likely to appear in the box next month include Richard Mueller's alternate history, "Age of Miracles," and a more contemporary tale by Sydney J. Van Scyoc. We'll also have Paul Doherty and Pat Murphy's new science column on Titan and a book column by Robert Killheffer that might stir up a bit of controversy.

Looking ahead, our fifty-sixth anniversary issue promises to be a good one. Headlining the issue is Peter S. Beagle's return to the world of *The Last Unicorn*. "Two Hearts" is a remarkable story about a young girl in a town being terrorized by a griffin. If you only read one story this year...you aren't reading *F&SF* regularly. (And why not?)

The lineup for our October/November issue isn't complete yet, but it's likely we'll have new stories in it by Dale Bailey, Gardner Dozois, Esther M. Friesner, Joe Haldeman, Elizabeth Hand, and Bruce Sterling. Subscribe now and make sure you won't miss this issue!

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Those of you who have enjoyed M. Rickert's dazzling tales of love and madness (such as "The Harrowing" in our April 2005 issue or "Cold Fires" in last year's anniversary issue) will be pleased to know that a collection of her stories, entitled Map of Dreams, *is due out next year. Her new story is a dark California tale that's liable to win her yet more fans.*

A Very Little Madness Goes a Long Way

By M. Rickert

SHE IS A YOUNG WOMAN, really, though coming upon her like this, standing at the window staring out at the bright California sun and palm trees, her hair pulled back in an innocuous ponytail, her shoulders slightly hunched, her arms wrapped around herself in a desultory manner, as if hugging someone who has become tiresome, she gives the impression of being a sad old woman.

"I thought you'd be happy here," says her husband, who sits at the edge of the bed unlacing his work shoes, his jogging clothes in a heap beside him and his running shoes on the floor by his feet. He isn't rushing exactly, that would be unkind and he is a kind man, but he does have everything ready to go. He wasn't a runner when they lived in Wisconsin. He smiles in spite of her mood, because he isn't much of a runner now either. Who's he kidding? But he likes the heat on his face, neck, and limbs. He likes the vastness of the blue sky, marked irregularly by the palm trees' single thrusts like fingers. Take that, friggin' Wisconsin winters, he thinks when he jogs down Canal and up Avidio Street. He likes

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the open feeling, so different from their bedroom where she stares out the window like an old woman.

When he's ready, he resists the temptation to bolt from the room. He walks over to her. Places his hand on her shoulder. She sighs. He tries to think of what to say, searching through the ideas as if they were on note cards. I love you. I'm sorry. Everything will be okay. (But he's finally come to understand it might never be.) We could have another child. (He won't make that mistake again.) I love you. I love you. (Does he? Is that what this emotion is? This rooting next to her when he longs to run out of the room and escape into the vast bright world?) "I love you," he says.

She shrugs. It's very slight but he's almost certain that she shrugs. Yet she leans against him, so perhaps he hasn't interpreted that first inflection of muscles right. "Don't you think," she says, "I mean really, I know what you think, but I can't get them out of my head."

"Melinda," he says. Just that. Just her name. But he says it in such a way that she pulls away from him. He lets her. He stands there for a moment and then he shakes his head. If she were paying attention to him, she'd see his reflection in the window, shaking his head. But she doesn't see him standing there and she doesn't see him leave. She doesn't see the palm trees, or the bright blue sky, or the blonde woman across the street bringing groceries into the house, or the man in striped shorts watering his lawn, or the children on bikes in their safety helmets pedaling furiously past as though, on some subconscious level, they know what she has brought with her.

Crows. Their sharp black beaks. Beady black eyes. Flap of wings, like the sharp crack of pillowcases and sheets snapped open to make a new bed. For someone else's child. She puts her hands over her eyes and sobs. Her husband, in a white blur she doesn't see, blazes past the window. The children on their bicycles shout at each other. She hears them only vaguely through the harsh cawing of the crows. Thousands and thousands of them. Watching her, with those beady black eyes, devoid.

"What you need to do is get involved in something else for a while," her best friend, Stella, says when she calls. "Have you thought of knitting?"

"I'm going to write about them."

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"Who?"

"The crows."

Stella moans. Well, it's not exactly a moan, it's a sigh moan combination, that's what Melinda thinks, and she's been noticing that a lot lately, in the people around her. "You know, I've been thinking," Stella says, "of taking a little vacation. Melinda?"

"I know people think I'm nuts now."

"Nobody thinks you're nuts. It's just, listen, how 'bout I come out there?"

"That crow spoke to me."

There it is again, that combination moan sigh, perhaps with a small sob or gasp at the end.

"I know you don't believe me. Nobody does. Crows can speak. I just want...." But she doesn't finish the sentence. What she wants is so much. She wants everything. What she's been given is this.

"I'm going to look into some flights, okay? I'll let you know what I find out."

"What? Oh, sure," Melinda says, not really certain what she's agreeing to. All she hears is "flight" and suddenly she is watching them again, thousands and thousands of crows flapping wings and rising only to land swiftly with their cawing sharp cries so loud she can hear them clearly through the closed windows, and all those thousands of miles, and even through time back to that day when she turned from her daughter's bed to stare out the window at those harbingers of death assembled across from the Children's Hospital. No one seemed to notice or understand their significance. Their cold eyes didn't even consider her or the child buried in the clean white sheets and hospital neat folds of a death they came to carry, the same way they picked through the garbage cans, and the lawn, and on one particularly gruesome day that Melinda still remembers by the strange combination of sweat and cold she felt, as they dove and fought over the corpse of one of their own, a dead crow they pulled apart with their sharp beaks and ate, flying into the trees and screaming at each other and her daughter moaned or sighed, she made a sound, Melinda turned to her, and knew, by the beautiful light that emanated there, a shiny bright thing in the dark, what would happen soon and who was to blame.

Later, when the crows fell from the sky, plummeting like rocks and

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landing in yards and playgrounds, and church parking lots, it didn't make her feel better, the way she had thought it would.

Even now, sometimes, she looks to the sky and thinks she sees a black spot hovering above her, destined to spiral down in a swirl of wings and dead weight.

HIS NAME is Corvus. His parents, hippies who really did wear flowers in their hair and lived in a bus, had intended to name all their children after birds. He has a sister named Robin and a brother named Jay, but he doesn't see or hear from them much. The one he hears from is Melinda, born "just at the edge of my change," as his mother liked to say, during her short second marriage to a carpet salesman from Iowa who died when Melinda was still a baby of something like failure to breathe, or some such malarkey of words, which Corvus can't completely recall. Something stupid like that. Something bureaucratic to get the paperwork through when all it really meant was that they didn't know why he died but he did.

Corvus is the one who flew to the cornfield state to comfort his mother when no one else would, and even now Melinda, who is a grown woman with her own life and the sad story of her child's death, seems to confuse him with her father though he doesn't think he looks like anyone's dad with his black leather jacket and his pierced ear and the tattoos of a snake, a naked lady, and on his back right shoulder, a raven, which he'd done out of deference to his name (though ravens and blackbirds are not the same) years before his kid sister went nuts about crows. So when she calls him from California where they moved to "try to make a fresh start" and says she is going to write a book about crows, "about the things they say and do," he rubs his brow and must have made a sound because she says, "I just wish everyone would quit moaning about me," which causes him to pretend he wasn't moaning at all and act excited and say how he's been thinking of coming out to visit her and that husband of hers, whose name he can never remember. What is it again? Not Jack but something normal and ordinary. Safe.

Is Corvus the only one who realizes the truth about Melinda? She should have changed her name by now to something extraordinary like Universa. He understands why their mother did what she did and gave her

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a pretty but basically normal name. But Melinda is a grown woman now. Shouldn't she know the truth? Corvus shakes his head as he begins to sort through piles of black clothes. What's happening to Melinda, Corvus thinks, can best be described by a term used for the poor and unloved. Though Melinda is neither, she still suffers from it. "Failure to thrive." She has no idea how extraordinary she is. She's surrounded herself with bland normalcy. Well, all right, maybe that's not fair, maybe ordinary people have amazing lives, he wouldn't know, when he sees them, in shopping malls, and coffee shops, or even just driving, they tend to wear the same expression, which is partly how he identifies them, it isn't an expression of much, neither satisfaction, nor despair, and certainly not harmony. It's like a mask they all wear. And Melinda has it too. But the thing is, Corvus thinks as he copies Melinda's new address onto a sheet of paper and tucks it into his wallet, she'll suffocate in that mask, just like her father, like a murder with no witnesses and no blood.

"I can't believe you invited him without talking to me about it first."

"Well, he is my brother."

"He never even remembers my name."

"So, tell him."

"What?"

"It's not like...it's not...Just tell him."

"I've told him a hundred times."

"You can't possibly. Stella is coming out too. What?"

"I thought we moved here to get away from everyone."

"Not me."

"Where are we going to put them?"

"Stella can sleep in my office and Corvus can sleep on the couch. Okay? Okay?"

The thing he hasn't told her about is the crow. It's just one crow, not thousands and thousands of them. It's one crow and he isn't even certain if it's the same one. How's he supposed to know? They all look alike to him. But this crow, well, he knows this is silly, but he thinks it's following him. He first noticed it back in Wisconsin. When the crows started falling from the sky, suddenly paralyzed from the poison. It wasn't unusual to notice a crow then. Circumstances had sort of created a hyper awareness

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surrounding them. But this crow always seemed to be looking at him, in that sideways manner of birds. Of course he figured he was imagining it. But then they moved here and he started seeing it again. Just one crow staring at him sideways as he jogged past, watching him when he got into his car in the mornings, standing on the lawn outside the office when he left work. It creeped him out. But he sure wasn't going to tell Melinda, or anyone about it.

Just as he didn't tell anyone about his daughter. People meant well, he knew, but it was nice to not have to deal with sudden kind words and gestures, which, in the end, were woefully inadequate. It was nice to be treated like a regular man and not like someone mortally wounded. That's why he didn't want them coming. Well, okay, and he didn't like either of them very much. They were both strange people. He couldn't understand what Melinda got from them that she couldn't get from him.

Corvus isn't surprised to be directed to the side for a terrorist evaluation. They already have his shoes. He takes off his jacket and belt. Raises his arms and turns for the wand. It's silly, really, how they keep trying to change that day in the past by doing the things now they wish they had done then. Corvus is surprised to feel the tear form and relieved when he's nodded on before it falls, as it does, when he leans over to tie his shoe. How can anyone not have compassion for them? They are so awkward, so earnest, so desperate, and increasingly, so alone. Shut off from the rest of existence, shut off from what would sustain them, by their own fear. He looks at the people waiting in the terminal with him, young families, an old man, some business suit men and women, a kid playing a little computer game, a baby crying, a young girl. When he takes a deep breath he can smell their human scent, marked as it is by the powerful fear motivator, laced with sweat, indigestion, onion, garlic, perfumes and lotions, and that vague odor of love.

Corvus stands in line and follows them into the plane. He knows there is irony in this, but he made a promise years ago and he intends to keep it. Because he's going to break the other one. He's going to tell Melinda what their mother told him.

He turns sideways to move down the narrow aisle. He senses the seated passengers eyeing him suspiciously. As if evil could be measured

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by black clothes and long hair. Like children, he thinks, who truly believe they can recognize a bad guy. When he gets to his seat number, he nods at the bald man who looks up at him, and taking in his size, stands in the aisle to let him through. Corvus scrunches into the window seat. He snaps the buckle shut and closes his eyes until the plane takes off. Then he opens them to look at the clouds. How will he tell her? "We are angels."

"What?" the bald man says.

Corvus looks at him, startled. Had he spoken out loud?

"Were you talking to me?"

Corvus shakes his head.

The man frowns and pretends to read his magazine, but Corvus can sense his awareness on him. He readjusts his weight, lowers his seat back, and closes his eyes.

When they land Corvus gets off the plane just like the rest of them and while most passengers have noticed him, and marked him in their minds, only one passenger has recognized him as someone who knows exactly what he is, only one passenger follows him.

"It wasn't murder," Stella says, rubbing Melinda's back as she weeps, while Joe, who Stella assumes is handling all this the best he can, in his own odd way, runs in circles around the house.

"I mean I was filled with hate. That's the thing," Melinda sobs. "I pretended like it was about reason and logic. But it wasn't. It was just about hate."

"Something had to be done," Stella says, trying to choose her words carefully because the fact is, she'd really been against it all along.

Melinda stops crying. She sits there, staring out the window and biting her fingernail. "Did I tell you one spoke to me?"

"Uh-huh."

"Do you believe me?"

Stella has stood naked in the four directions. She has pledged herself to the earth and the elements. She believes in a lot of things people think are nuts, but even she has trouble believing this.

"What did it say?" she asks.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Of course I believe you," Stella says, relieved to find this is true. She

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doesn't add the explanation; I believe you believe it. She doesn't think she needs to.

"Murderer."

"What?"

"That's what the crow said."

She didn't do anything at all for about two weeks after her daughter died. Slept, mostly. Joe had taken time off too. He slept in late and ate the sympathy food people kept sending over: cheesy casseroles, meatloaf, chocolate cake, banana bread, potato salad, and brownies in front of the TV where he muttered invectives at talk shows. Then, one day, he got up right in the middle of a show titled "I'm in love with my mother's husband" or something like that (Melinda could hear it from the bedroom), shut it off, got dressed and went to work. After that the house was very quiet.

Melinda was surprised to find that sleep was like a drug she could always afford. Sure, sometimes she woke up and stared at the flowered border of her walls, but if she didn't move around too much or open her eyes too wide, she could sink right back into that place where sometimes she found her daughter still alive.

But one day she woke up to the horrible noise of a crow laughing at her. She got out of bed and walked across the room to the window. The ugly bird was on their lawn. Suddenly, it flew up and perched on top of the swing set. If she had had a gun, she would have shot it. Instead, she ran out into the yard in her pajamas, shouting. That's when it spoke to her. That single evil word, before it raised those great wings and with one last laugh, flew away. Melinda collapsed, just like the bad witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, she sank to her knees in her white nightgown and if she could have melted she would have.

When she got up she went into the house, took a shower, put on sweats and a T-shirt, sat down at the kitchen table, and began writing letters. To the newspapers, the hospital, the PTA, animal control, the local TV news stations. This city was in danger. Didn't what happened to her daughter prove it? It was an invasion. A possible plague. She started a campaign against the crows. Now, after all this time, she sees her motivation. She can only wonder what got into everyone else. Because the plan was absurd really.

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The city council passed the measure with only a vegetarian and a liberal dissenting. They fed the crows bread laced with poison. That's why birds fell out of the sky the way they did. Suddenly paralyzed, they plummeted to the ground. Their corpses littered sidewalks, parking lots, and yards. Once when Melinda was driving to the post office, one plummeted right onto the hood of her car; its black claws splayed and stiff, its wings spread out like a hard cross.

THAT NIGHT, after Corvus doesn't arrive when he said he would and Stella is asleep on the futon in Melinda's office and Joe is snoring in their bed, Melinda puts on her sneakers and stands in her front yard. They don't really have a backyard here, just a deck and a strange tree she hasn't identified yet, spindly-limbed, a fruit tree of some sort. She stands in the front yard and waits for it to happen. After a while, beneath the white moonglow and the scatter of stars, she begins to rise, she floats up about three or four inches and then, gently, like soft dust, she lands.

She doesn't know what this is all about. She only knows it began happening when things got really bad. She wonders if things are getting really bad again.

Corvus is still alive when the creature removes his jacket, his rings, and the knotted string bracelet Melinda's daughter made for him. He's alive to hear it say, "Clearly a hybrid."

Corvus watches it search through his pockets. When it finds the wallet, it tosses out the money, the credit cards, the driver's license, and the library card. It almost tosses the wallet, too, but then the paper with Melinda's address on it slips out. Suddenly its beady eyes focus on his.

"No," Corvus gasps.

The creature smiles.

Corvus looks down and sees a man splayed, the shape of his limbs at odd angles, but bloodless. Standing beside him is someone wearing Corvus's jacket who turns and looks up at him.

It's like looking at a mirror, only something's not right. The man raises his hand. He is wearing Corvus's rings. He turns and walks away.

Corvus looks down at the body that remains, his eyes ripped out,

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as though by scavengers. Corvus doesn't have time to mourn. He follows the creature who waves down a taxi and tells the driver Melinda's address.

"Corvus," she says and she opens her arms to hug the creature but she is glowing with a silver sheen, as if she were the Moon; it burns him and it takes all his power not to writhe with pain as he walks right past her open arms, pretending he hasn't seen them. He turns at the door to smile at her but everything about her hurts him; even the house contains her glow, even the doorknob.

She stands there in her nightgown and sneakers, her long hair hanging down, so ordinary looking, so easy, a puzzled expression on her face. Clearly, she has no idea.

"It's not me," Corvus shouts but of course it comes out faint, having to travel all the distance from death to the living.

"Corvus?" she says.

The creature can't help it. He's terrified of her. Even at this distance, he burns. "I've been sick," he says, suddenly remembering humans and their fear of illness.

Melinda frowns.

The creature smiles. He should have a plan, that's the thing. But he doesn't. He's never needed one before. "Let's go inside," he says, though the house burns him too. Buying time, he thinks, is this what that expression means?

When they go inside a man stands there in boxers and a T-shirt. He puts out his hand. But the creature sees her glow there; he slips his hand into the pocket of the leather jacket.

"He's been sick," Melinda says.

Joe nods. To be polite. But the guy is worse than he remembered. There's even a faint odor coming off of him. Like sauerkraut.

"Do you want popcorn?" Melinda can't help it. Whenever she's around Corvus, she's fourteen again. When he used to visit they'd watch the late movie and eat popcorn.

"I think I'll just go to bed," the creature says, trying to form a plan. But he's finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate and he's worried that he'll lose the disguise if he's not careful, which would not be a problem

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with the man who looks half asleep, but he's not sure what would happen with her.

When Melinda brings the creature the sheets and a pillow she looks at his face closely. He looks so different, she thinks, though she can't quite decide why until finally, she sees it. "I never noticed before," she says.

"What?"

"How much you look like a crow."

Behind them, Joe groans.

The creature can't figure out how to get around it, he has to take the pillow and sheets from her or she will just stand there and stare at him, but after he does so, he turns away; he is in agony.

"I can help you make it," Melinda says.

"No. I'm going to sit up for a while."

"I'll stay with you. I'll make popcorn."

"I don't like popcorn," the creature says, remembering the strange feel of it in his mouth, once, years ago when he went to a movie with a young woman who was later found raped and murdered. Not by him, of course. He didn't do petty crime. Right away he knows this might be a mistake. He smiles at her again, that baring of teeth. She just looks at him. He raises his hand in a wave.

She doesn't even try to kiss him goodnight. She is surprised to find that she doesn't really want to. Joe falls asleep right away. But Melinda lies there and tries to figure out what's happening. She has trouble concentrating; her mind keeps drifting back to that night, so long ago. When their mother told them she was an angel.

They tried not to laugh, but it was impossible not to. Melinda ended up spitting Dr. Pepper in a spray while tiny white flakes of popcorn flew from Corvus's mouth.

"I'm serious," their mother said.

"I'm sorry, Mom. We're sorry," they said.

She stood there in her blaze of red curls and the purple and green kimono and for a minute Melinda thought maybe she was telling the truth, the kimono sleeves sort of looked like wings, and she was the most beautiful mother in the school. Really. Even though she was so old.

Afterward, the three of them sat on the couch eating popcorn and watching a movie about aliens with long green arms and slits for eyes and

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the invasion of the world until Melinda fell asleep with her head in her mother's lap, which smelled like dark chocolate. She had the vague impression that Corvus and their mother spoke then, whispering about angels and demons and wings, but she was never sure if this was something she actually overheard, or something she dreamed.

It's Saturday and Joe likes to sleep late on the weekend so Melinda gets up and tries to be quiet as she walks across the room. She's tired and she can't shake the feeling she's had, since Corvus arrived, of something not being right.

When she walks past the window they begin cawing. She pulls back the drapes. The room blazes with morning sun and the crows' sharp cries. Hundred of them assembled in her yard, screaming, with their little throats and pointed tongues, the sharp beaks open like her daughter who said, "Mom?"

"Jesus Christ," Joe says, "oh Jesus Christ." He comes to stand behind her and wrap her in his arms but Melinda doesn't move or soften into his embrace. She stands there, frozen stiff as a corpse while the crows scream. With a sob she pushes past Joe and runs out of the room. She wants Corvus. But he isn't in the living room, or the bedroom either, or the kitchen or anywhere in the house.

Stella finds Melinda standing in the living room, staring out the window at the crows. It must be the angle of the sun, Stella thinks, because Melinda is glowing, a bright halo of light all around her body, and just like that, with the noise of sheets snapping on a clothesline, the crows rise in flight. Melinda turns and Stella gasps at the odd illusion, the glowing woman surrounded by wings.

"Corvus came," Melinda says, "but he's already gone."

"He'll be back," Stella says, though she really has no way of knowing.

"I don't think so," Melinda says, no longer glowing or surrounded by wings.

Joe comes into the room dressed in his jogging clothes. He says good morning to Stella and gives Melinda a kiss on the cheek. "Corvus is gone," she says.

He suppresses a grin. "Probably just went for a walk." But this is absurd. Corvus is not the kind to go for a walk in the California sun. He

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is more about shadows and dark rooms. If he is gone, sure, it's weird, but also the sort of thing, Joe thinks, that he's always been capable of. He sighs.

"You can go," Melinda says. "Go. Run."

He thinks of asking her if she is sure, but he doesn't want to press his luck.

After he leaves, Stella says, "Are you really worried about Corvus?"

"Something strange is happening," Melinda says. "I feel like I'm in *The Birds*."

"In them?"

"You know, that movie."

JOE CAN'T HELP IT; every time he leaves the house he feels like he's escaping a great darkness, he feels like he's running away. He loves the hard concrete beneath his feet, the sun shining on his face and limbs. Hell, he even loves the damn birds. When he's running he feels almost whole again. He can feel his muscles and the sweat on his skin. He feels like a man with a body, instead of the husk he's been. God, he misses her. He misses her too but there's no use trying to talk to Melinda about it because she owns all the sorrow. Well, all right, he thinks as he turns down Avidio Street, that's not fair, but it's been hard enough keeping himself together through all this, and he's not sure how to help her. His feet pound the concrete but he doesn't feel weighted at all, he feels bright, alive, almost winged. He doesn't know what's going to happen to Melinda or to their marriage, but he's already decided, he's going to survive. He's going to learn how to be happy again.

The creature can't believe his luck when her husband runs out of the house like a man making his escape. He watches him and thinks it's just so perfect. He can't destroy her, she's just that powerful, something he understands is both a curse and, he hates to use the word, a blessing, but he can ruin her, oh yes, he can ruin her by ruining everything she loves and believes in.

"Corvus," Joe says, panting and grinning, as if he'd been running to find him. "Melinda was worried about you."

"Come here," the creature says, "I want to show you something."

Joe doesn't know why he's never liked him. That's something the

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running has helped him with. Afterward, for fifteen, twenty minutes even, once for almost an hour, he feels like he can love again. As though he drank a witch's potion. This time it's landed on Corvus. Joe follows him down a side street and into a narrow California alley lined with concrete walls, roses and wind chimes.

The creature walks up to Joe who stands there, smiling affably; just for the fun of it, he lets the disguise fall. He watches Joe's face change. Just when he would scream, the creature reaches in, extinguishing the noise, and the light.

"You know what probably happened," Stella says, "they probably ran into each other, went out for coffee together."

Melinda looks at Stella and nods. How can she explain? Evil exists. It stalks her for a reason.

"It's a beautiful day, you should go outside and play."

"I don't wanna."

"Your father and I got you that nice new swing set and you never play on it."

"I hate playing outside."

"Oh, you do not."

"It's buggy. And the grass itches my ankles."

"What are you going to do?"

"I dunno. Sit, I guess."

"I want you to go outside."

"I don't wanna."

"It'll be good for you. You go outside for a while so I can finish my work and then we'll go get ice cream."

"Can't I just stay in the house? I'll be quiet."

"I want you to get some fresh air."

For a while Melinda stood at the window and watched her, lazily swinging and talking to herself. She looked perfectly happy. Safe. But when she came back inside she was probably already dying, though neither of them knew it yet. They went for ice cream. Hers melted so fast she might already have had a fever. "Mom?" she said and Melinda saved her the way she always had, by licking the dripping scoop until it formed

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a neat round ball, and by then she might already have been turning into a spirit. Melinda remembers the way she looked, all wide eyes shining with fever and light. Though at the time Melinda thought it was just happiness.

Now, Melinda stares out the window. Stella goes into the kitchen, which is brightly lit by the California sun. She tries not to regret coming here. This is to help her friend, after all. But the depression is palpable. In spite of the blue sky and the light, which pours into this little house, Stella feels like she is walking in a thick fog. It presses her body with unwelcome weight. No wonder Joe has taken up running. Stella glances toward the living room. Melinda is still staring out the window. Furtively, she doesn't know why, Stella walks to the front door. She opens it slowly. It makes a slight popping noise but Melinda doesn't seem to notice. Stella opens the door wide. Just as she takes a step toward it, Melinda speaks.

"What?" Stella says.

"I said, where are you going?"

"I just wanted to step outside for a minute. It's so beautiful out. Wanna come?"

"Do you know what's out there?"

Stella looks out the doorway again. She looks at Melinda. "I'll just be a minute."

Melinda doesn't answer.

Stella steps outside and immediately wants to scream or shout. She shuts the door behind her. God, it feels so good to breathe. She doesn't even think about how she's barefoot and wearing boxers and an old T-shirt but if she had thought about it, she might have concluded that she's been infected by the California spirit. Melinda, staring out of the window, might have seen what happened to her, except Melinda isn't staring at what exists, but at what she remembers. It takes her a long time to realize Stella isn't coming back either. It's as if, she thinks, they are being swallowed by the light, the beautiful California day. She stands at the window while the neighbors leave their houses in suits and ties, suits and heels, shorts and sandals, carrying briefcases, school bags, coffee mugs, driving SUV's, Volkswagens, skateboards, and bicycles.

"Be careful," Melinda whispers to the glass. No one hears her and really, no one would take her seriously if they did. It's obvious she is

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someone who isn't all there, something not right about her. And that's what the police think too, when they come by later to tell her they found a body, a jacket, rings, a sheet of paper with her address on it. At first she tells them it's her brother but then they mention the jogging clothes, and she says it's her husband and right away they suspect her of murder, maybe a double homicide.

Then things get really strange. The police officers, the detectives, the coroner, the news reporter, everyone who was at the scene of the crime, though they arrive and leave in separate vehicles, have accidents. Every one of them dies.

When a reporter calls to tell her this, Melinda, who has been crying since she had to identify "the body," suddenly dries up. That's it. She's been crying all day and she cried for months before that and now she's done. Because, at a certain point, she thinks, you have to shut down against all the horror of life.

"Do you have any comment?" the reporter asks.

"The body," she says.

There is a long silence. Melinda isn't sure if he's still there or was ever there. Maybe he's just something she imagined. Maybe everyone was.

"Did you say, 'the body'?"

"The body is heavy," Melinda says.

"The body is heavy?"

"We are...."

Again, that silence. Melinda looks out the window and sees the blonde woman arrive home. She gets out of the car and waves to her neighbor, a middle-aged man watering his lawn. He walks over to her and then, in a quick and sudden movement, wraps the garden hose around her neck. She struggles against it, but the man is suddenly amazing in his strength, he pulls the hose tighter, water sprays wildly from the nozzle, the blonde woman kicks but her feet flail in the air, she pulls at the hose, waves her arms in a helpless imitation of its wild gyrations, the stream of water rises and falls, slithering across the blue sky. "My neighbor is strangling my neighbor," Melinda says.

"Right now?"

"Okay. She's dead."

"Did you kill her?"

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"No. My neighbor did. Oh, but he's clutching his chest now. A heart attack, I guess."

"Are you saying your neighbors had a fight and killed each other?"

"Uh-oh," Melinda says.

"What now?"

"Children."

"What about the children?"

"Coming down the street. Riding their bicycles."

"Please don't hurt the children."

"What? I would never. Oh, but there they go."

"Where?"

"The car. They're dead."

"Someone hit the children with a car?"

"I suppose. But it didn't look like, wait, here's the driver. She got out of the car. She's covered in blood. She's crying. She's trying to save them. I don't know why. It's obvious, oh, now it's her."

"What?"

Melinda turns away from the window. "Excuse me," she says, "but weren't we talking about something else?"

"The body."

"Oh, that's right. The body is heavy."

"Whose body is heavy? Do you mean your husband's, did you kill him?"

"Kill him?"

"I've done some research. I know about your daughter. Did you kill her as well?"

"It was a mosquito. It bit one of those crows that had it. Then it bit her."

"Yes, well, that's what they said, but now, with all that's happened — "

Melinda moves her thumb and presses the button that shuts his voice off. She watches her neighbors running out of their houses, piling into cars with kids, dogs and cats, ferrets, pet pigs, hamsters, while the adults and children talk on cell phones, wave their arms wildly and scream at each other. She hears a helicopter flying overhead and sirens looming nearer. She opens the front door and is assailed by the violent noise, the screams, the terrible noise of the helicopter spiraling down, the sirens veering into

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sick wails, and she smells the blood metal scent of death. "It's not my fault," she whispers.

It's just like they say, as if a great weight has been lifted from her shoulders. Melinda begins to rise, but this time she doesn't hover, as she always has in the past; she rises higher and higher until she is as high as the palm trees and even higher still.

The creature, shading his eyes against the bright sun, watches her. With a snort he leaves, going in the opposite direction. The mayhem he brought with him, though it remains, does not continue its relentless course. The wounded do not die, but suffer. Crows swoop down and pick at the shiny parts of the dead; watches, rings, silver hair and fillings. A wide-eyed EMT, sloshing through the muck of bloody water, turns off the hose. News crews come and set up their mobile units, and food vendors follow. The crows peck at dropped bits of corn dog and discarded fries. The children ride bicycles around the dead, or pick flowers, or go into dark rooms and don't do anything at all. Experts come and say this is recovery. This is the cure.

Melinda soon discovers that she likes to fly so high that she no longer sees anyone, nearer to the sun, unpopulated as it is by human misery. Sometimes she thinks she won't return, but she always does. She understands this is the reason for everything. It took her a whole lifetime to learn how to ascend but it doesn't take her long at all to learn how to dive down again. "We are angels," she whispers to the people. Some of them hear her. Some of them don't.

— for Stephen King

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In our last issue, Bruce McAllister treated us to a look at what happens to a hero after he saves the world. This month he returns with a gentler fantasy about a boy, his grandmother, and a bit of magic.

Spell

By Bruce McAllister

WHEN HIS GRANDMOTHER died without telling him she would, the boy was twelve and tried not to think about it. When he thought about it, he saw how alone he was, and how thinking about it helped make it so. And if he was alone, who was there to protect him from what wanted to kill him, what could not stand the idea that he existed — the idea that he was, as his grandmother had believed, a boy who deserved to exist?

It was better not to think of her at all; or if he had to, to think only about the four times she had saved him from the evil, and not the night she'd died in her bed two rooms away without his knowing it, dying not because, as the doctors said, "Her heart just stopped — it happens," but because what wished to kill him wished her dead, too, and so her heart had stopped.

So he tried, but it was difficult because his mother — his grandmother's daughter — reminded him every day that she was dead.

Your grandmother is dead, John.

I hope you have not forgotten her.

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I hope you remember how much she loved you.

It was as if his mother knew that by forgetting what he had lost — the one who could save him — he might feel *safer;* and this, he knew, his mother did not want.

When he was little and his grandmother first came to live with them in Florida, where his father was stationed with the Navy, the boy would go to the beach with her. She liked to paint seascapes, and he would play at her feet while she painted. She gave him his own easel — a little one just his size, which she herself had bought — and brushes, water cup, and paint; but before long he would tip the cup over, get sand in the paint or on the brush, and wander away to play with his bucket at sea's edge, collecting seashells, stones, and tiny pieces of driftwood that looked like animals.

One day he picked up a purple balloon someone had left on the wet sand, and within seconds he was crying from the pain, running to his grandmother, who held him in her big lap and told him what the purple balloon was, how even when they die the man-of-war jellyfish can sting you.

Another morning, as he sat in the shade of her umbrella — with no one else on the beach — he looked up to find the sea rushing out like a draining bathtub and, far beyond it, a wall of water so high it looked like a mountain coming toward them — a mountain with a face, one he knew. This would be the first time his grandmother would save him.

As the great wave approached, his grandmother, though her knee hurt her, made a quick pattern in the air, grunted something that sounded like "Wind and Sea and You and Me," and picked him up — brushes, buckets, and sand flying around them in a little whirlwind — lifting him high into the sky, high as the gulls, high above the wall of water as if she had wings he could not see, coming down again, the two of them, upright and dry, only when the wall and its face had passed and the beach was covered with little pools of water and the gulls were starting to return, looking for stranded fish, dead crabs, and whatever else the wave had left.

As she drove them home in her Pontiac — which always made him think of a big pale-green frog — she pretended nothing had happened, that she hadn't flown up higher than two houses and saved him from the evil

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that wanted to take him. "What wave, Johnny?" she said, but there was a twinkle in her eye, one that told him she knew and that he didn't need to ask again. They wouldn't tell his mother, of course.

When they got home, his mother, a big woman, looked at them and said, "So where have you two been? John looks sunburned."

"You know where, Dorothy," his grandmother said with a smile. "Where we always go."

His mother didn't like the answer, the boy could tell.

"For so long?" his mother said.

"Painting the sea takes time, Dorothy."

When the boy looked at his mother's eyes, he saw them flash, saw something dark and glittering coil for an instant in them.

"Well," she said with a smile that wasn't really a smile, "I hope the sea wasn't too rough to paint."

His grandmother laughed. "It never holds still — but nothing worth painting ever does."

The boy watched the thing coil again, and then, as if afraid of being seen, slip away into darkness.

When the boy was eight and his family lived outside the capital, their apartment was by a creek, and here he hunted red-eared turtles, box turtles, frogs, and guppies, putting them in mayonnaise jars with holes poked in the tops or plastic bowls or little wire cages his father made for him. Carrying them in his red wagon, which he pulled behind him down the sidewalks, he sold them to whoever would buy them. The families that had children bought them, while the apartments with only old people did not; and this made sense. *Amphibians*, he knew, were not easy for an old person to take care of.

The creek he liked best was the one at home. It fed into a big swamp that hadn't yet been drained for homes or stores. But there were other creeks, too — one by the bus stop, another at the *cul-de-sac* at the end of the street, and three or four in the woods by his school. All drained into that swamp. Before school and after, in the creeks and ponds around it, he would hunt for turtles and frogs, and sometimes he would get to school with his pants legs wet from creek water. Once his teacher made him go home to change, but this made him happy. It meant he could go through

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the woods again twice when everyone else was in school. This was the day he found, halfway home, a pond full of what his favorite book called "painted turtles," and for a moment could only stare. The pond wasn't large, but it was perfectly round, like one of the marvelous circles his grandmother sewed or painted, and on its bank the turtles made a circle, too, the red markings of their skin and shells flashing like fire in the sunlight. It was like a dream, and he wanted to tell his grandmother about it — he wanted her to see it because she would understand — but he couldn't. She was at home cleaning, doing laundry, maybe starting to cook food for dinner.

The turtles stared back at him, and he knew that if God had a goldfish pond, these were the turtles He would have in it, basking in the sun, fiery as the sun. These turtles he would not try to catch; and as he stepped back to take another path, three of the turtles startled, slipping off their banks into the black water and wonderful rotting leaves while the others just kept watching him.

At a creek closer to home, where the woods began to thin, he filled his bucket (the one he hid in a tree by the school each morning) with young turtles. His book called them "sliders," and because they were young, they were very green. A few minutes later he found the wide plank that went from one side of the creek to the other. This was the one creek he couldn't cross by wading, and today there were two older boys and an older girl on the other side sitting and waiting when they should have been in school. He'd never seen them before, but he could tell they were waiting for someone — anyone — to cross the plank. The girl was frowning. She had eyes like one of the boys, and was probably his sister. She was older and bigger and looked even tougher than the boys. Her eyes flashed, and there was something familiar about them.

"What do you have?" the tallest boy asked, the one that had the girl's eyes, standing up and nodding at his bucket.

He didn't want to answer, but he knew they'd get mad if he didn't. "Some turtles."

"If you want to cross the bridge, you gotta give them to us."

"Why?" he asked.

The boys laughed. "Because if you don't we won't let you cross."

"Why?"

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"What do you mean *why*?" the girl said. Her eyes flashed again in the sunlight and even this far away he thought he saw something move in them.

He was shaking. He took a breath. "Why do you want my turtles?"

This made the brother angry. "Give us the turtles or we'll come and get them, you little shit."

The plank was too heavy for him to push into the water by himself, and he wasn't a fast runner. He shouldn't make them mad, he knew, but he heard himself say:

"Is this what God would want you to do?"

"*What*?"

"Would He?"

"Jesus Christ," the brother said. "Are you crazy?" He was about to start across the plank when the girl stopped him. She was looking at the boy and his bucket of turtles — staring at him — as she said, "I'll do it."

There was a board in her hand now — one with a nail in it — one the boy hadn't seen before — and she came toward him across the plank sure-footed, her eyes never leaving him. *She wanted him*, he saw, and he recognized the eyes at last. They were in another body now, a girl's, not a woman's, but that was the only difference. Didn't the boys see it? Didn't they wonder where the board with the nail had come from — why the girl was acting this way?

His grandmother wasn't there — she couldn't be — and yet suddenly, because the girl with the familiar eyes, the dark thing coiling in them, was coming for him, *she was*. She was back at the apartment cleaning and doing laundry while his mother taught school in the next town and his father worked in the capital, but she was somehow there. He could smell her, the flowery powder she wore, the vinegar she used on her hair. He could *see* her, too, in her flower-print dress, one of the ones she always wore. She was there, standing on the other side of the creek just behind the girl; and the boys, who hadn't noticed her before, did now and stopped and stared.

"Where'd *she* come from?" the smaller boy said to the taller, frowning, clenching his fists, and the girl turned on the plank and saw her, too.

"*You're not wanted here*," the girl hissed, eyes flashing, and with her

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free hand made a pattern in the air — one the boy had never seen before — and hissed again, "*He's mine.*"

His grandmother smiled at the girl, but it was to him that she said, "John, do whatever you'd like."

"What, Grandma?"

"Do whatever you want to do."

He did. He pointed with his finger at the plank, where the girl was standing, and as he kept his finger aimed there, his grandmother helped him do it. Together, without touching it, they lifted the big board high into the air; and as it rose, the girl fell off into the muddy water, shouting and hissing and dog-paddling so hard she couldn't make patterns in the air. And then the plank was back in place, exactly where it had been before.

The two boys — even the girl's brother — had backed away from his grandmother. They didn't want to be near a crazy old woman who made strange things happen.

"Stay where you are," his grandmother said to them, and they did.

When the girl was out of the creek, muddy as a snapping turtle, it was as if the fire in her eyes had been put out. Her eyes were the eyes of any girl now. She couldn't have hissed. She was the tall boy's sister now, only that, and she looked half-asleep. "Craig," she said to her brother. "What's happening...?"

"Hold your sister's hand," his grandmother said to the brother, and the boy took it. "Keep holding it until you're sure she's your sister, and then you can all go home and watch television."

The evil that had made of the girl something else had left them. The woods were bright. Nothing coiled or slithered in the shadows. They were just two boys now, like him, and the girl a girl, and his grandmother, with a rustle of leaves, was gone, back to the apartment, laundry and dinner.

You know what to do, John, was the last thing he heard his grandmother say.

He did. He crossed the plank because he needed to — he didn't want to get completely wet and muddy — and when he reached the other side, he gave the boys and the girl, who still looked asleep, his bucket of young sliders. They just stared at him — even though he smiled.

His grandmother would get him another bucket, he knew, and God always made other turtles.

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* * *

That night, over dinner, his mother said, "And what did you do today, John?"

Afraid to answer, he looked at his grandmother, who said, "I hear he gave some turtles to three bullies."

His mother looked at his grandmother, then back at him, then at both of them again, and said, "And why would you do that, John?"

The only thing he'd told his grandmother was that the school had sent him home to change. She'd given him dry pants and sent him back. He hadn't mentioned the plank or boys or girl, how the girl had gotten muddy, or what had happened to the plank, but he didn't need to. She'd been there. She knew, and it made him smile.

He said to his mother, "They didn't have any and I wanted to make them happy."

"And did you?" She didn't believe him, he could tell, but that was not the only thing that made her mad.

"Yes, Mom," he said, "I did."

She was staring at him — just at him — and he could see the jealousy grow quickly until it towered above them all, even his father, even his grandmother.

"I'm glad to hear it," his mother said at last, but it was a lie.

"Sometimes," his grandmother said with a smile, "that's what bullies really want — to get what they want without having to take it. It makes them happy."

WHEN HE WAS eleven and his family lived in a big house in San Diego, on the great bay, and his mother taught school, as always, and his father left the house every morning to go to the Naval laboratory high on the peninsula (where scientists built miniature ships made of brass and tested radar and sonar with them), he would go with his grandmother after school to Sorrento Valley, in the wild northern part of the county. There he would catch butterflies, katydids, witch moths, and other insects for his collection while she, with her watercolor class, painted the old eucalyptus trees they loved to paint, and the hills of sage, anise, and lupine. It was here the boy first saw the tiny blue butterflies that would

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die if they left these hills (these he would not try to catch); and the great black wasps with orange wings — "tarantula killers" — that cruised like little helicopters a few feet from the earth, looking for the big spiders to paralyze and lay their eggs in, so their children would have something to eat. Both of these creatures filled him with wonder, and, like the painted turtles, made him think about God.

He had collected snakes when they'd lived in Palo Alto, the year before, but had felt bad about keeping them in terrariums and feeding them mice and lizards, which he also loved. So he'd stopped collecting them. But one day in the Sorrento Valley, as his grandmother sat on the hillside with her painting class, the boy saw a king snake, his favorite kind — the one with the "yellow chain" pattern — slipping through the grass at his feet; and he grabbed for it. When its head came up to look at him, its tail coiling around his arm in fear, he saw what he'd seen only once before and even then, not out in nature but in the museum downtown.

The snake, no more than two or three years old, had two heads. Both were alive, but one looked dumb, staring up at the sky as if in wonder, while the other hissed at him, ready to bite, with teeth so tiny it would only make him laugh. The two-headed king snake in the museum's display case had been bigger, stuffed, and though its heads had been posed to look alive, the eyes had been dead.

He wanted to let it go, and yet he didn't want to. It was a beautiful thing, and he wanted to have it, to stare at its two heads for days until he understood what it was, how God could make a two-headed snake (not often, but sometimes), strange as it was, doing it with love so that a boy who was also a little strange might one day hold it, mesmerized by the miracle it was.

But he felt guilty about keeping it, and as he felt the old feeling, the snake relieved itself on his arm, as snakes sometimes do when afraid; and as it did, he looked at its two heads and saw the ground opening at his feet, while the cobra — the one he knew from his dreams, but never when awake — rose from the earth, from the lupine and sage around him, and he could only stumble back with a cry, looking everywhere for his grandmother.

The cobra wouldn't stop, he knew. It never did in his dreams and it wouldn't now. It grew and grew until, thick as a tree, it towered over him.

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Where was his grandmother? Where was her class? Couldn't they see it? Its hood flared and he saw lettering on it, big old-fashioned letters that said "YOU" and "MINE" and something else he could not read; and when he looked into its eyes, which were the size of plates, he recognized them but could not remember whose they were. They were the cobra's — that was what mattered — and he was, this time, going to die, just as he had in his dreams and as he would have twice awake had his grandmother not saved him. All it would take was for the jaws above him — the terrible jaws — to spit, the venom dripping down his face, or the tip of a single fang, long as a curved kitchen knife, to touch him.

Then he heard a voice, one he knew, and when he looked to his right, there was his grandmother, her paint box and pad of watercolor paper under one arm, her other hand free to draw quick things in the air, while a swarm of the great black spider-killers and their orange wings spun in a whirlwind around her and little blue butterflies covered her hair lovingly like pieces of the sky.

The cobra turned to her, enraged, rose higher, hissed, and got ready to spit; but the paint box was a book now, somehow, and the paper was wood, two pieces, crossed in a cross, and his grandmother said to him without moving her lips:

Hold it up to the sun, John.

The little two-headed snake was still wrapped in fear around his arm. He wanted to let it go, but instead did what she asked — raising it to the sun.

Seeing it, the cobra pulled back, hissed again, and rose higher — *wanting him.*

The little snake in his hand became two, then three, then a dozen, all two-headed and glowing like little suns; and when he finally let go of them they rose like butterflies, like wasps, filling the air; and as they did the cobra stopped, stared, and could not look away.

His grandmother laughed.

That, John, she said to him, *is what you do to anything that wants to take you. What it really wants is to forget itself, to forget its pain. It is happy now, watching the little snakes fill the sky, watching what it has always dreamed of being: Tiny and beautiful.*

Back in the car, he tried to rub the smell off his arm, but his grandmother said, "Don't worry about it. It's the smell of fear, yes, but also love."

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* * *

That evening, just before his mother and father were to return from an awards ceremony at the laboratory, he sat in his grandmother's bedroom, at the big table she had for all of her sea shells — the ones they'd collected together in Florida and San Diego, and the ones her son, who had died years ago, had collected for her on Guam during the war. Together he and his grandmother had put the names of the seashells — the scientific names and the common ones — on little cards along with information about where they'd found them, and when, and what the weather had been like, because that's how scientists did it.

As he held a *Murex foliatus*, beautiful with its petal-like folds — and the only one they'd ever found in the great tide pools at the end of Point Loma — a shadow fell over the house and he knew what it was. As he and his grandmother listened, the front door opened and slammed, the house shook, something shrieked and what wanted him was there again. But this time he told himself what it really was.

His mother and father were back, and *she* was coming for him, hoping that his grandmother would be asleep by now, that he would be alone in his bedroom — awake or asleep, it didn't matter — and that what lived in her eyes would be free at last to do what it had wanted to do since he was born.

To have him — and if she couldn't, to make sure no one else could.

His grandmother — blue eyes blinking as she listened, as she saw things he could not see — looked at him quickly and said, "Do what we've done before, John."

And they did, quickly. They put the largest shells — the big conchs, long trumpets, heavy "helmet shells," and "ton shells" — in a big circle on the rug. Inside that circle they put another circle — of bright scallops, *pectens*, from all over the world, and angel wings, and fragile *tellinas* (the prettiest of the clams); and inside that circle another circle of the most beautiful cowries (like living pearls), cone shells, and volutes; and inside that, a circle of the sturdiest, bravest murexes; and then a circle of the most fragile ones, the "Venus combs" and the black-spined *nigrispini* — until the floor was covered except for a circle just large enough for a boy in the middle of it. In that space his grandmother made a five-pointed star with *olivas*, slipper shells, keyhole limpets, rare tegulas, scorpion conchs,

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and *spondyli*, and made him lie down on it quickly, though the spines of the *spondyli* hurt.

There was a knock on the door, and neither of them said a thing. He looked up at his grandmother and waited. "Do not look at the walls," she whispered, but he couldn't help himself. He wanted to know what the figure at the door was doing to the room this time. The walls had darkened, were darkening even more as the knock came again and louder. The walls were beginning to glisten. They were glistening with scales. They were *covered* with scales, and something — something like spit or venom or sea water — began to drip from the flowery wallpaper, from those scales, eating at the paper's pattern of birds and flowers, making it curl to reveal beneath it the flesh of something huge — a great skinned frog, an immense turtle with its fiery-red shell crushed, something he'd once loved.

The knocking grew more frantic as if it were not just angry, but afraid, too. The door began to bleed, and as he and his grandmother watched it they heard what sounded like crying — which was impossible — a trick, a lie, since what was pounding wanted to kill him.

Do not move, his grandmother said. *Be the star on the floor.*

The door buckled in at the pounding and the voice on the other side, as it wept and screamed in rage and grief, said *Are you all right?* and *He's not in his bedroom*, but as always it was a trick. If he moved, she would take him and he would be *nothing*.

When the knocking stopped at last, the voice stopped too, and with it the crying.

"If you surround yourself with what you love, evil cannot hurt you," his grandmother said as they picked up her sea shells, put them back on the table, and she made the walls look right again. "It can only be jealous of what you have."

Two months after his grandmother died, as he lay in his bed in the dark, he heard it coming for him on heavy footsteps. His grandmother's room was too far away for him to hide in. Her shells were too far away and he wasn't sure he could make the star correctly anyway.

When the figure entered his room, it did not turn on the light.

"John?"

He could barely hear the word above the knocking of his heart.

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"Yes," he said.

"I wanted to tell you good-night." It stepped toward him in the darkness. He couldn't see its face. He wanted to look at it, yes — so that he might understand why it wanted to kill him — but he also didn't — didn't want to see the face he had tried so long to love, but could not.

"I wanted to tell you good-night," the figure said again. It had come to do what it couldn't do before — what, now that his grandmother was dead, it could. Why was it waiting?

"I also wanted to tell you — "

His heart stopped. The figure had sat down on the side of his bed, where pale light from the porch fell through the bedroom blinds to its broad face. He could see its eyes now. He could see its hands, perfectly still in its lap — hands that never made patterns in the air, that hated and always would the idea of such things. He looked in its eyes for the cobra, the towering wave, the girl with the board, the bleeding door, but he saw none of these things.

What he saw instead was impossible.

" — how sorry I am your grandmother is gone....She was my mother, too...and I miss her, John." There were tears in the words. It had to be a trick, a lie, but it wasn't.

The figure fell silent then, unable to speak.

In the silence of the room he heard his grandmother — who was gone, yes, but somehow there, as she would always be — say:

This is what she wanted all along, John — to have you for herself, that is all. And now that she does, what wanted to kill no longer needs to kill. It can sleep, and I will be watching. There are more witches, John, and spells than the world can imagine, and a witch who doesn't know she is one is a sad and terrible thing.

Grandma? he asked.

Do not be afraid.

I can't....

Yes, you can. You now know who you are.

The boy waited, and when the figure sitting on the side of his bed still did not speak, he reached out, and, though he was shaking, touched it, saw his hand begin to glow like a little sun, and in a moment the figure touched him back, uncoiling in the warmth of his light.

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"An Everyman with an edge in his voice," is how one writer recently described Robert Reed. That's an interesting description, and perhaps it explains why Mr. Reed's stories sometimes seem to disappear into the background...only to catch you unawares. But that's not what you should expect from this contemporary tale of life in the mall. Put on your reading glasses and check this one out...

Pure Vision

By Robert Reed

WHEN THEY CUT MY HOURS back for the last time, I was left with Saturdays and Monday afternoons, which was all right. It was still regular money, and back then, a little cash always seemed like enough. Besides, I kept a little girlfriend who happened to make enough for both of us.

There wasn't much work to do, what with the store going under in another few weeks. I was free to watch people wandering past, guessing who belonged here and who was simply lost. I could talk to the customers — the last of our regulars, mostly — some who just happened to be girls. Excuse me, young women. Who usually didn't know my girlfriend, so the chances were pretty low that my conversations would get back to her. Or if I wanted, I could just sit at the counter and read the inventory. Not that there was much to choose from anymore. I could see straight through the book racks, looking all the way to the back wall. Prices on hardcovers and mass markets had been coming down in little tumbles and big leaps, but now they'd hit bottom, and the only titles remaining were the ones nobody wanted. By the end, our business was mostly magazines, which is

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a lot like selling bananas. The bananas came to us fresh, but if we couldn't get rid of them by the end of the week or the month, we'd peel off their covers for the refunds and throw the fruit in the trash.

Monday was magazine day. That's why I got to work in the afternoon. The manager needed somebody at the cash register while he sorted and counted the magazines, before he set them out on the stacks. I'll call him Barry. We were friends once, Barry and me, although I can't remember why. I would come in after lunch on Mondays, and he'd vanish into the back room, and when he was ready, he'd bring out the week's crop. Our moneymakers were the old standards: *Playboy* and *Penthouse, Hustler* and *Swank*. Except now I've heard that *Penthouse* is in bankruptcy. That just doesn't seem possible. Who ever went broke selling pussy?

Anyway, it was Barry's job to count each and every *Penthouse Forum*, and this story doesn't have much more to do with him.

That Monday, I was sitting at the counter, reading. There wasn't anybody else in the store, except for a couple regulars parked in front of the porn. I'm not sure what I was reading, but it was good — probably an Elmore Leonard with the cover stripped off. I know I wasn't paying attention to very much else. For instance, there was this weird little guy hovering in the hallway, and for a long time, I barely noticed him.

Hovering. That's the only word for it.

He was standing there maybe twenty minutes before I gave him a glance. He was maybe twice my age. Middle-aged, in other words. Somewhat fat, but dressed in a nice suit, like a successful lawyer or an insurance hound would wear. Looks-wise, he was totally ordinary, with smart eyes and thick glasses. But more than anything, what I remember about the guy is that he looked really, really scared. And that made him interesting. I finally gave up reading just to watch him standing in front of the locked glass door to the Old Optical Shoppe, apparently waiting for somebody to show.

This was every Monday afternoon. When you're on the second floor of a shopping mall that's buried inside a dying downtown...when you're surrounded by office buildings where people are chained to desks, and breaks can't last more than ten minutes...you get accustomed to the endless sound of nothing and nobody....

I called over to the stranger.

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Offering friendly advice, I said, "They've closed down."

He had to have heard me. But for a long second, Mr. Good-suit didn't seem to notice. Standing with his back to the eyewear store, his head swiveled side to side, and then sometimes he looked over his shoulder, as if he was afraid somebody could have slipped past and opened the store up without him noticing.

"They're closed," I said.

"Which I know," he interrupted, almost before I spoke. Then he shook his head and pushed his fat glasses against his damp round face, and with an absolutely terrified voice, he asked, "When will the doctor return?"

The doctor?

A face came to me. Middle-aged men always looked alike to me back then, just as kids today seem to be pretty much interchangeable. The optometrist who ran the store was one of those fellows who look like they were born as fifty-year-olds. Big and balding, and tired in some deep way. But really, I hadn't seen him or anybody else in there, not for a couple weeks. Barry claimed they'd gone out of business. Which is what I told the little guy, adding, "I don't know why they haven't gotten their gear yet. Bank problems, most likely."

One last time, the little guy looked through the sliding glass door. But nobody had miraculously appeared. No receptionist sitting at the front desk, and no trace of the optometrist either.

"If you want," I said, "you can wait over here."

Not that anybody was going to show up, of course.

But the guy gave a little nod and shuffled over. And then, he suddenly looked at me. He looked into my face. And something he saw made him smile.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

He started to hover in front of my counter now. I looked at the guys flipping through the porn. I looked back at my book. Then quietly, he said, "You were a customer there too. Weren't you?"

"What's that?" I said.

"Your glasses," he told me, reaching toward his own face.

My glasses had big lenses and dark plastic frames, and they were ugly-cheap, and when I look at photographs of myself from those days, I have to wonder how I ever managed to get laid.

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"What about my glasses?" I asked.

"You were a customer," he repeated softly, almost whispering. Then he pointed a thumb back over his shoulder, adding, "Like I was."

Twice, maybe three times, I'd had my ugly-ass glasses adjusted in the Old Optical Shoppe, since it was free and convenient. And I guess that made me a customer, which was why I could nod and say, "Sure, I've used the place," and sound perfectly honest.

"How long has it been?" he asked.

I had to think.

Before I could answer, he asked, "Is your prescription holding?"

My eyes have always been crap. I was the first kid in class to get glasses, and without them, I couldn't make out a face at twenty feet. But by then, nothing much was changing in my eyes anymore. Not on a year-to-year basis, at least. I'd had that particular pair of glasses for the last three or four years, and I still saw well enough to read and keep from bumping into walls.

"My prescription's holding up just fine," I told him.

He smiled, but not in a simple happy way. He looked sad now, and for a moment, I could see jealousy flaring up.

Then he sighed and shrank down a little.

"What?" I asked. "Your prescription isn't holding?"

"Isn't that obvious?" he said.

A lot of things are obvious. If you let them be.

"Tough luck," I offered.

He glanced across the hall again. "Do you know where the doctor went?"

To jail, I wanted to say. Not that I had any real knowledge, but honestly, that guy used to weird me out. He was kind of drugged-up-vague and peculiar in hard-to-point-to ways. At first glance, he didn't even look like a medical professional, or even a halfway decent butcher. I remembered him having big hands and a stupid comb-over, and his glasses were thick as those glass bricks people use to build walls with. I remembered a voice dripping with some accent, probably from the middle of Europe somewhere. An accent you can never pin any country or language to. And that's as much as I could recall then, thinking on the fly, trying to figure out this nervous little fat guy in his thousand-dollar suit.

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"Do you have a new address?" he asked. "Or a phone number, maybe?"

I could have played this a hundred ways. But only one of those ways would have been honest, and when given a choice, I don't like honest.

"Maybe," I said.

"Maybe which?" he asked. "An address or phone number?"

"Maybe both," I told him. "But maybe I won't tell you."

Really, I've seen some desperate faces. When I was still a kid, I'd already known a few people pushed to the edge, or farther, and just by watching their eyes, I knew that you could see them starting to tumble. But this fellow was the worst. Easily. He looked frightened and lost and stupid and mad at himself for feeling that way. Which made it fun, playing a little game at his expense.

He sputtered for a moment or two. Then again, he looked across the empty hallway, wishing hard for things.

"Go down the escalator," I told him, "and west one block. There's a perfectly good Pearle Vision waiting for your money."

"No," he muttered.

"Why this store?" I asked.

"Do you know, or don't you?"

"Maybe I do," I said, "and maybe I don't."

"Well, I can't tell you why," he whispered.

"That's your right, I guess."

In a tight little voice, he said, "You wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Why not?"

"You'd think I'm making this up."

"I don't know what you're making up," I pointed out. "Tell me your story, and maybe I'll give you his new address."

"No," he grunted.

"Fine," I said.

I went back to reading, or at least pretending to read. And after maybe twenty seconds of nervous silence, he said, "All right. I'll tell you what happened...."

Call him Jones. Or Smith. Or call him Poppycock, for all I care. I don't remember his name, and maybe I never heard it. He said the doctor's name

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twenty times, but I've never been much at remembering Hungarian or Bulgarian or whatever kind of name it was. The story is about Jones and the doctor. With Barry sitting unseen in the office, counting *Forums*, and two regulars camped out in front of the porn section, off in their own sloppy little worlds. And then there is me.

"My old glasses broke," Jones reported. "I was rubbing my nose one morning, while I was at work, and the pad came off. The right pad. It slipped free, and I couldn't put it back on again."

"I bet that hurt," I offered.

"I needed them fixed," he said. "Right away. And since I wasn't working far from here, and I'd walked past this place a few times...and I knew they never were particularly busy...." He found something to smile about. "I came here on my lunch hour. Just to get the new pad. There wasn't any receptionist, or any technician at the desk. But the store was open, from what I could tell. I came in and rang the bell, and I sat and waited, and I rang maybe two more times. Then I got up to leave, and the doctor came out of his examination room."

I nodded, remembering how the only times I ever saw the doctor was when he was coming out of that room or going back in again. And whenever I saw him, he was staring at people — at me and at everyone — and doing it in a way that never put anyone at ease.

"He said something to me," Jones reported. "'May I help you?' or words to that effect. But before I could answer, he pulled a little slipper made of silicone from his coat pocket, and like that, my glasses were fixed.

"He gave them back, and I put them on.

"'Your right ear is sore, isn't it?' he asked me.

"I hadn't noticed, but yes, it was a little bit uncomfortable.

"'Let me make an adjustment,' he said. Then he started working with the usual little tools, bending and tightening and then setting the glasses back on my face again. Which was a very strange moment, I realized later. How many times have you had your glasses adjusted? And how many times has the person behind the counter gotten it perfect on the very first attempt?"

Now that he mentioned it, I realized the doctor had done pretty much the same trick with me.

"'Take your glasses off again,' the doctor told me. 'Please.'

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"'Why?' I asked.

"'Just pull them away from your eyes, please. I want to see what I can see.'"

Jones hesitated for a moment, and then confessed, "I've never been a particularly alert person. You know? Things would happen around me, and maybe I'd notice a quarter of it, if that much. And the important, subtle stuff would just slip right by."

"What kinds of stuff?" I asked.

"Everything," he said, as if it was obvious. For a moment, he looked lost and sad. "The doctor stared at my eyes for a long time. It was as if he could see qualities, genuine qualities that needed to be measured or counted, or whatever. And then he unlocked a drawer and pulled out a contraption. Like a pair of glasses, only with extra lenses sticking out every which way.

"He started flipping lenses back and forth, and then he handed it to me.

"'Put your glasses back on,' he told me. 'Then set this on top of them.'

"I did what he wanted.

"Then he pointed across the hall and said, 'Go look around. Look at the faces, and come back here and tell me what you saw.'"

At that point in the story, I had to laugh. "Oh, yeah," I told the little man. "I remember you now."

"But you don't," Jones replied.

"Sure I do. A guy wearing those funny glasses...I remember you and them, now that you mention it...!"

"But you weren't working that day."

"No?"

"A red-haired girl was behind the counter," Jones explained. "She was wearing a tight blouse and too much eyeliner, and she was sitting on that stool, her back straightened up, and her pretty face working hard not to cry."

I didn't know what to say.

"A boy had hurt her," he needed to tell me. "Hurt her very badly."

"She told you that?"

"I saw it."

"What do you mean, you saw it?"

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He gave me this long, hard look. Then with a quiet voice, he asked, "Didn't you imply that you're one of the doctor's patients?"

"The girl used to work here," I reported. "Her name's Janice, and she's had a lot of man trouble."

"You don't know what I'm talking about, do you?"

"I thought we were discussing Janice."

Jones pushed his glasses closer to his eyes, like anyone does when their prescription is failing. "Have you ever seen a human soul?" he said to me. Then before I could answer, he asked, "If there was a way for you to peer inside the head of a stranger and see the person within...what would you give for that kind of talent, my friend...?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

Then he nodded while squinting. "'You'll get over the boy,' I told her. I told Janice. 'Just looking at you, I can tell. You deserve somebody better.'"

OPTOMETRISTS AREN'T real doctors, not like an ophthalmologist is. But the doctor was much more than your typical shopping-mall optometrist. Born in an obscure village in the Balkans — an isolated hamlet where families had a long history of odd wizardry and small-scale magic — he had inherited a penetrating kind of vision from both sides of his family. Still a young man when he escaped to the West, he realized that he needed to make a living, which was why he went to school and learned about nearsightedness and astigmatisms and how to correct for these common weaknesses. But the doctor remained interested in other elements of sight and perception — qualities not covered in any of his textbooks. On his own time, he fashioned lenses from glass and rare elements and ancient enchantments as well as his own intuition. The natural talent of his eyes reached only so far, which was why the doctor used himself as a subject for his studies. Over the years, in tiny stages, he invented new arts and recultured old ones, producing a set of lenses that saw humanity in its truest, purest form.

Jones explained this to me, and then he suddenly removed his glasses, setting them on the counter between us.

"Pick them up," he told me.

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They were heavy, maybe twice as heavy as I expected. Which explained why his nose wore two ugly red marks where the pads dug in. Inside the lenses, I could see the ordinary lines where the bifocals began. But there was more to them than you'd see in ordinary lenses. I held them up to the light, spying little ripples and colored smears and hints of something that looked like old writing. Then I pulled off my own glasses and started to put on his, looking straight at him —

"Don't," Jones warned me, snatching them back.

"Why? What would I see?"

"They wouldn't work for you," he muttered.

"You're sure?"

"No, I'm not." But he had the glasses perched on his battered nose again. "I just can't let you wear them," he explained. "One of his rules was that I never, ever let anyone else put them on."

"He has rules?"

"He was very specific about what was expected of me," Jones said. "These tools came with some clear-cut conditions."

I nodded, glancing across the hall for a long moment. Then I looked back at him, remarking, "That's a really sweet suit you're wearing."

It was very nice. Wool, I think, and well tailored. But all he wanted to say was, "I can never use my vision to hurt people."

"Of course you can't."

"When it's possible, I have to help people."

"Isn't that everybody's obligation?" I asked.

He glanced at the doctor's store again. Then he quietly told me, "I don't live in town anymore. The last three years...well, I've done pretty well for myself at work, and I was transferred to a different division...never mind where...."

"But your eyes are changing," I guessed.

"In the usual ways, no. My prescription is still good enough. But he warned me that there would be fluctuations in my new vision. The rare elements inside the glass would wander, and the polarities would be lost. Whatever that means. But mostly, I think his magic weakens as time passes."

"So you came back here to visit him?"

Jones nodded once, the old despair resurfacing.

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"Any other rules?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," he said.

But I didn't particularly care what the doctor had told him. So I said, "Be honest. How many people have you hurt with this new pure vision of yours?"

That won a hard stare.

I didn't need special lenses to see everything. The suit was enough, and that look of pure cold terror in his puffy face.

"You're sure you want to find the doctor?" I asked. "Because when he sees your soul, for himself, he's going to ask, 'Why should I help you?'"

Jones halfway collapsed against my counter.

By then, it was just the two of us in the store. The regulars had left the porn section dog-eared and done. Barry was still counting magazines in the back room, invisible to the world. And I looked over at the Old Optical Shoppe one more time, saying with a quiet little voice, "I can't help you find him. I don't know any addresses or phone numbers, sorry. Wherever the doctor went, he didn't leave his forwarding address."

I could hear my new friend breathing, slowly and deeply.

"But you know what," I added. "I don't think anybody's taken so much as a display frame out of that store. Which means that at the very least, those test glasses you wore once...they're probably still waiting inside that drawer...."

I told Barry that I would close for him, as a favor, and after he did his celebratory dance and went home, I told the final customer, "Wait in the back room, out of sight. I'll come get you when it's time."

Until then, everything had been just so much talk. Jones stared at me through his failing glasses, trying hard to measure my soul. But he couldn't. So then he shivered and held his mouth closed, and after a moment, he said, "You haven't told me. How exactly do we get past that locked door?"

"That part's easy," I said. "We'll just heave a couple Stephen Kings through the glass."

"You're teasing," he observed.

"Yeah, it's just a joke." Then I showed him my eyes, saying, "You've got to ask yourself: How much is this really worth to you?"

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He nodded and sighed, then slipped off into the back.

I counted out the cash from the register and made out the deposit slip for the bank. Right on time, our lone security guard wandered past. He was a teenager, and just about as dim as a person can be. I said, "Hey," and handed him a fresh copy of *Hustler*. "On the house."

"Thanks," he gushed, rolling it up and hurrying off to the can.

I went back inside and collected up Jones, plus a tackle box full of mostly useless tools. We crossed the hall, and I set the box down and pulled out the biggest hammer and a little crowbar.

Jones swallowed. "You can do this?"

"Easily," I promised.

He touched the door, saying, "This looks like a good lock."

"I've popped a few of these annoyances in my day," I told him. Which was the truth. "One good smack, that's all I need."

Except the mechanism was tougher than I'd guessed. It took a few whacks and some hard jerks with the crow bar. But there was nobody around to hear us, and after the latch was busted, I pulled the door open just far enough to slip inside.

The air smelled stale, but nothing more — stale and dusty and lit only by the lights in the hallway. How many weeks had the place been closed? Two? Four? Or was it longer? I wasn't sure, and I didn't care. Jumping over the countertop, I started pulling open drawers, finding nothing but little tools and tiny screws, cannibalized frames and somebody's lunch, forgotten and wrapped in a wrinkled brown sack.

"Those glasses were where?" I asked.

"Somewhere," said Jones, barely paying attention to me. He was trying to get into the doctor's exam room, growling, "Locked," every time he tugged at the door's brass knob.

Down low was a small metal drawer, and it was locked, too.

I dug out a big screwdriver and stuck my head into the hallway for a couple seconds, making sure we were alone. Then I went back in and jabbed hard, wrenching the drawer open on the first try.

"There's a light on," Jones whispered. "Behind this door."

I pulled out a heavy piece of handmade equipment. Lenses rode on hinges and two stems were made from pot metal, while the frames were big enough to hold a couple of Hubble telescopes. It was ugly and familiar.

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I had seen it before, on at least two occasions. Both times middle-aged guys were wearing this apparatus, walking up and down the hallway, staring like idiots at every passing face.

I was looking the contraption over, deciding what to try first.

Jones had taken my crowbar. Then with a splintering of wood, he pried the door open, letting the fluorescent light wash over us.

"Oh, God," he said.

I turned.

"Jesus," he said, stepping inside and then backing out again. His face was sweaty, eyes filling up his big glasses. He looked terrified and weak, and after a couple deep breaths, he decided to back up even more.

The doctor was sitting in his examination chair, slumped down like a man ready to relax. The pistol had dropped to the floor. The single bullet had punched through his brain, but neatly, the impact leaving the head tilted but his enormous glasses still fixed to his bald bloodied skull.

I stepped past Jones. The blood was dried hard, and the body was stiff and cool to the touch. But there wasn't any trace of rot, like there should have been. Not a whiff, not anything. It was like staring at a mummy in its earliest days. The face was smooth and simple, almost like a baby's, and the glasses were even thicker than I remembered, maybe six inches at their deepest. The doctor had lashed them to his head using a leather shoelace.

"This is kind of weird," I mentioned.

Jones made himself step inside. He stared at the corpse, and then he followed the dead man's gaze. Set up in the middle of the room was a big cheap mirror. "He must have been looking at himself...."

"Seems like," I agreed.

Then Jones looked at me, amazed and crazy. "But that's against the rules. Looking at your own soul is the surest way to go mad, he told me."

"Still," I said. "You can imagine the temptation."

Jones stood his ground, shaking hard. I didn't need special lenses to read his mind. Maybe before he knew what he was going to say, I knew. With a quiet sure voice, he told both of us, "I don't need this."

"You don't," I agreed.

"I have to get out of here," he whimpered.

So I led him back into the front of the Shoppe, and with half a nudge, I said, "Then go. Get out of here. I won't tell anybody about you. Go."

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The last time I saw Jones, he was running hard for the exit. He didn't look back at me, not once. Nobody saw me wipe the place clean of prints and jam the back door shut again. And then, because it seemed like an exceptionally good idea, I took that crazy mess of lenses and metal for myself.

Years later, on occasion, I still throw on the magician's apparatus. As promised, it helps me read the souls of people, and particularly the young souls of pretty women.

For me, it's been no problem at all.

If my prescription changes, I just add another lens or two.

If there's a mirror in the room, I hang up a towel or just make myself look the other way.

What I figured out — and this comes after a lot of hard consideration — is that the good doctor got himself in trouble because he really cared about souls. What's inside another person was utterly fascinating to him, and of course he had to stare. But not me. Souls interest me only so long as they can help me, and most of them can't.

Really, I'm basically an amoral and increasingly old fart, and I know that already.

No need to stare at myself in shiny glass, thank you.

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When we published Eugene Mirabelli's "The Only Known Jump Across Time" in the Sept. 2003 issue, we acknowledged that it wasn't so much a work of science fiction as it was a tale with science as its subject. Reader reactions to the story were very good, so we think you'll like this new tale as well. It's a bit hard to classify, this one is, but it's definitely fiction, it has some speculation about science, and it's a joy to read—is that enough for all of you?

After having taught writing at SUNY-Albany for many years, Mr. Mirabelli is now retired and living in upstate New York. His latest novel, The Passion of Terri Heart, *was published late last year.*

The Woman in Schrödinger's Wave Equations

By Eugene Mirabelli

1

SCHRÖDINGER: LIFE AND Thought was written by Walter Moore and published by Cambridge University Press in 1989. It's a superb book, giving a detailed and dramatic narrative of Erwin Schrödinger's life and a lucid explication of his ideas, not only his insights into quantum physics, but an account of his philosophical speculations as well. The author presents the world in which Schrödinger lived, his home, the places where he taught, the intellectual milieu around him — his passions, his friendships, and the many women he loved. This is the book that Amy Bellacqua was reading.

Amy was twenty-eight and worked as a waitress at the Capri on Santa Cruz Avenue in Menlo Park. She had never been especially interested in physics but, as she said, she had nothing against it either. Furthermore, she liked biography and felt this one was good. Mostly good. It did have some fancy-looking equations, but they didn't interrupt the flow of the

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story. Let me be frank — Amy was reading *Schrödinger: Life and Thought* because the young man who had moved into the apartment upstairs was getting his Ph.D. in physics and she wanted to be able to talk to him about something he liked the next time they met in the laundry room or the parking space out back. They rented flats in a small box-like house of yellowish stucco — Amy on the first floor, John Artopoulos on the second.

John was twenty-eight and was finishing a dissertation in theoretical physics at Stanford. In high school he had been a whiz at science, and as a college freshman he had picked up a tattered paperback copy of George Gamow's *Thirty Years that Shook Physics* and that book led to his becoming a physicist. He liked the informal style of the writing, and he was intrigued by Gamow's drawings and most especially by his photographs — snapshots of Niels Bohr and his wife roaring off on a motorcycle, Werner Heisenberg taking a swim, a bare-chested Enrico Fermi swatting at a tennis ball, and Gamow himself with Wolfgang Pauli on a Swiss lake steamboat. Those people knew each other, got drunk together, sang songs, and together developed quantum mechanics; he wanted to be part of that, wanted to join them. Now he was overworked and was beginning to wonder if that great sense of fun and friendship had gone out of physics. He spent his time in a small cubicle at the Stanford Linear Accelerator (SLAC), or in his lonely apartment, or away at Heidi Egret's studio north of Berkeley.

Heidi was twenty-eight, an artist, a painter. Of course she was still too young to be famous, but her reputation was growing, and recently *California Spectrum* had listed her as one of the ten younger artists to keep an eye on. Her work had evolved rapidly, keeping pace with changes in the art market, and though she was not always in the spotlight she was usually nearby. She was best known for those abstract paintings in which she used a pointillist technique she called pixel transformation. People differed about Heidi's work and whether it was advanced or merely an updated version of Seurat's theories from a century ago, and some even debated whether it was well done or not. But everyone agree that Heidi, who had spent some years as a surfer, was a knockout. John had met Heidi at a beach party one Saturday afternoon and had been dazzled.

* * *

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2

That was the same Saturday that Amy Bellacqua had met John. Amy had been in the little parking area out back of the yellowish stucco house, trying to wedge a couple of tables into her small car. She had rolled the round table into place, its legs tilted up onto the back seat, but was having a hard time lifting and positioning the oblong table. Furthermore, she was getting hot. She rested one end of the table on the car seat and with her free hand she grabbed up the bottom edge of her jersey, mopping the sweat from her eyes just as the young man from upstairs came around the corner of the house in beach shorts and sunglasses, a duffle bag under his arm. He tossed the duffle bag into his car, then turned to her. "Can I help?" he asked, taking off his glasses.

"I hope so!" she said. It took a while, but together they were able to get both tables in. "Thanks," Amy said, taking the opportunity to look at him openly now that they weren't wrestling with the tables. "The tile makes them a little heavy," she explained, then immediately regretted telling him the obvious.

"They look good, the tiles. Very colorful."

Amy was uncomfortably aware that her damp jersey was clinging to her breasts. "Oh. Well. Thanks. I'm taking them to sell at a flea market. Actually."

She smiled and waited for him to turn away so she could leave without being rude, but instead he said, "My name's John Artopoulos," and he put out his hand and she shook it and said, "I'm Amy Bellacqua." He asked her if she worked at the flea market and she laughed and said, "No, I just go there when I have something to sell. I'm waitressing, mostly. What about you?" she asked.

"I'm working on a dissertation in physics."

"That sounds interesting."

"Does it?" He looked surprised.

"Don't you like physics?"

"Sure I do." He laughed. "But it never sounds interesting to other people." They talked of this and that for a brief while, then said goodbye and went their separate ways, John to the beach party and Amy to the flea market where she came across *Schrödinger: Life and Thought* and, after leafing through a few pages, she bought it.

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3

John saw Heidi Egret's paintings on their second date. "I like the colors in this one," he said. "What's it about? I mean, what's it a picture of?"

Heidi hadn't answered, so he turned to where she was seated cross-legged on her pink exercise mat, brushing out the tangles John's frenzied embraces had made in her pale blond hair.

"I didn't ask you to explain string theory. Right?" she said petulantly.

"Right," he said.

"And you shouldn't ask me to explain my paintings. It always confuses me to do that. — Anyway, what are we going to do next? Do you want a cigarette or something?"

From his first sight of Heidi at the beach party John thought of her as the quintessential California girl. She had a tattoo on her right shoulder blade that other people might think was a devil's pitchfork but which John saw as a trident, symbol of the sea god Poseidon. He had grown up in Massachusetts and had never met anyone like her — not just her looks — he'd never met anyone so open and easy going, so laid back. He called her his California, or his Californienne, which he meant as an endearment, but it annoyed Heidi, not simply because she was from Oregon but because, as she informed him on their third date, she wasn't *his*. She was a free spirit and didn't belong to him or to anyone. "Are you angry with me?" he asked. He had just driven up from Menlo Park and his knapsack slumped from his hand to the floor in disappointment.

"No. But we can go to the bedroom and make up if you want," she said, brightening. "It beats talking."

That's how it was with John and Heidi. The only reason he wasn't with her all the time was that his research fellowship kept him at SLAC, down in Menlo Park, and her half-time teaching at Contemporary Arts kept her up north of Berkeley, a long drive. Her studio, with its big slanted skylight, was a happier place than his desolate apartment, so each weekend John drove up to her place. The weekends took time away from his dissertation, which had come to a halt, but he hoped his work was going to go better since meeting Heidi.

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4

One weekend Heidi went up to Oregon to visit her stepfather. "After all, he's paying the rent here. I owe him a visit now and then," she had told John. The weekend Heidi went to Oregon was the same weekend Amy Bellacqua asked John about something she had read in *Schrödinger: Life and Thought*.

Amy was sitting on the back steps reading the book when John came around the corner to his car carrying a red plastic bucket. She watched as he began to roll up his car windows, then she slid the book behind her and called out, "Hi!"

He turned and saw her. "I've decided to wash my car," he said. "Just to see what color it really is." He came to the steps, turned on the garden faucet and let the water run into his red bucket, then turned it almost off while he tried to think up a way to engage her.

"Actually, I think mine's dirtier," Amy said. John crouched by the bucket, the throat of his shirt hanging open, and she saw his chest hair.

"I've got a couple of sponges. You can borrow my soap, if you want," he offered, catching Amy unaware as she gazed thoughtfully at his chest.

"What? Oh! *That*. Okay! You go ahead," she told him. "I'll go get dressed in something that it won't matter if I get it soaked." She snatched up the book and ducked inside the door, tore off her blouse and jeans, pulled on a pair of old cutoffs and a black Grateful Dead T-shirt. But she never much liked the Grateful Dead, didn't want him to think she did, so she tore it off, started to pull on an another but remembered it said *Boys Lie!*, clawed it off, tossed aside *Jesus is coming. Look busy!* and pulled on the white one that displayed a steaming cup of coffee — *The Daily Grind, Albany, New York*. Then she raced back outside to where John was soaping his car.

They washed their cars, all the while talking about the kinds of people you meet at flea markets or at the Stanford Linear Accelerator and about movies they liked and whether you'd want to live in San Francisco even if you could afford it, talked about things like that. John finished first and after hosing down his car he helped rinse Amy's. When they were finished, he put his sponges and soaps into his bucket while she coiled the garden hose. And that was that, car washing was over.

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Amy went indoors feeling elated and disappointed at the same time, which was very confusing. She showered and decided it would *not* be smart to get involved with somebody who lived right upstairs. She got dressed feeling very clear headed. Then John knocked at her door and asked did she want to get something to eat and she said yes.

They drove in John's freshly washed car, which now showed all its rust, and they ate at a deli. John asked Amy where she waitressed and she told him about the Capri restaurant on Santa Cruz which, she said, wasn't big but she liked her job there. It happened that John knew something about restaurants, too. "My parents have a restaurant, a Greek restaurant, in Boston. That's where I'm from. And you're from Albany, New York," he told her.

"What? Me? No, no, no!" She laughed. "That old T-shirt comes from New York. But I grew up outside Sacramento. My dad teaches high school science. My mom's a guidance counselor. I'm just all California, nothing else. What's it like in Massachusetts?" Amy asked him.

John had spent summers working on a lobster boat when he was in college, and Amy had spent those same summers as a life guard on the beach. They talked and talked and talked much longer than they realized and would have gone on talking forever if John hadn't suddenly remembered — "Damn! I just remembered!" — that he had to go over to his office before five. So they drove back to their yellowish stucco apartment house. As they turned into their street John was feeling exhilarated and oddly light-headed, as if he had been drinking wine all afternoon and not simply talking with Amy.

"I have a question for you," Amy told him. "I'm reading this book about Schrödinger."

"You are?"

"Yes. I found it at the flea market. I'm up to the part where he develops those wave equations. And I was wondering — " She broke off.

"Wondering what?"

"Schrödinger was married, you know, but in the middle of winter during the Christmas holidays he went off to the Swiss mountains and shacked up with this woman and that's when he did it."

"Did what?"

"Did everything. For two whole weeks all he did was make love to this woman and write those equations."

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"Really? That's the way it happened?" He didn't know whether to believe her or not.

"It's in the book. But nobody knows the woman's name. Nobody can figure out who she was."

"I didn't know any of this," he said, clearly surprised.

"What I want to know is, can you find who the woman was by looking into the equations?"

He glanced sideways at Amy to see if she were serious. "No," he said.

"I think so," said Amy, agreeable and firm.

They rolled to a stop in front of their apartment house. John shook his head, no, and turned to her as if he were about to say something — his mouth even opened a bit — but nothing came out.

"Yes. I think she must be in there somewhere," Amy said. Then she hopped out of the car, turned and smiled at John. They both said it was a great car wash and lunch, then they waved and John drove off, telling himself, "Don't get involved with a crazy woman, no matter how great she looks."

5

Heidi taught part-time at Contemporary Arts, north of Berkeley, and she told John how much she despised her job. "It's a second-rate art school with third-rate students," she said. Her voice was somewhat muffled because she was lying on her stomach on the pink exercise mat. "They're so materialistic, I mean *utterly*. The idea of art for art's sake, the idea of pure art, it's beyond them. All they care about is money. A lot of them have part-time jobs and come to class so tired they fall asleep. I mean, they really doze off. They say they want to be artists and then they turn around and ask me how to make art pay, like I cared, or something. — Now do up by my shoulders," she said, giving directions to John, who was massaging her dark blond back, a complex surface which he thought more engaging than any dreamed of by Euclid, especially with its little trident tattoo.

"Why don't you quit your job and come down to my place?" he said, pausing to add a few more drops of oil to his hands.

"We'd starve on what you make."

"We could take turns eating," he said, kneeling forward to resume his

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massage. "I could eat on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. You could eat on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. We both could eat on Sunday."

"Hey! Are you saying I'm fat? You're not saying I'm fat, are you?" Heidi had raised her head and twisted around to look at him, frowning.

"No, no, no! That's *not* what I meant."

She relaxed and turned away, resting her cheek on her folded arms. "Anyhow, you'll be making plenty next year after you graduate. We can wait," she told him.

"I'll be a post-doc next year. Post-docs are slaves."

"Now my feet," she said. "You always forget to do my feet."

John took her to her favorite restaurant, a fancy place with soft music and dim lights, the table illuminated by five low candles floating in a shallow bowl of water. Over the lemon *sorbet* Heidi asked him, "What's a post-doc?"

"After I get my doctorate I'm a post-doc. I'll get a post-doc research job someplace. Those can go on for two or three years, or longer. Post-docs do really advanced research, but they get paid as if they were still grad students. I have to do post-doc work first to get a really good position later. That's all."

"Oh," Heidi said at last, her eyes soft with sympathy. She slid a hand across the table and gently laced her fingers through his. "I'm so sorry."

6

The next Friday Heidi phoned John, reached him on his cell phone as he was speeding from Menlo Park to her place. "Don't come. I've got to visit galleries all weekend," she told him. So John turned around, drove languidly back home to work on his dissertation. Actually, he didn't feel like working on his dissertation, so he thought he'd knock on Amy's door and borrow the book about Schrödinger, but when he turned into their little parking area he saw a handsome red sports car in his place beside Amy's car. He parked on the margin of brown grass, looked at the leather-and-mahogany cockpit of the Alfa Romeo, heard rock music from Amy's apartment and trudged upstairs to his desk, hoping it would rain into the sports car. Around midnight he heated three slices of frozen pizza in the microwave and ate dinner at the sink, returned to his desk and two hours

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later fell asleep over his equations. Saturday morning he pulled up his kitchen window shade and saw the red Alfa Romeo was still there, but when he went out it was mercifully gone. He crawled into his rusted car and drove to his cell at SLAC and worked for fifteen hours. Sunday morning he took a long hot shower, stared out his kitchen window a while at his car and Amy's, side by side, drove out and bought a fat newspaper, drove aimlessly this way and that, then headed back home and knocked on Amy's door and asked would she like to come out for breakfast or brunch.

Her face lighted up. "Come in. I'll make us something," she said. "I was hoping you'd stop by."

Her place was a maze of greenery, a jungle — potted flowers crowded the window sills, mossy baskets hung from the ceiling and overflowed with blossoms, trays of pale green sprouts lay underfoot, and luminous mosaic tiled tables stood here and there and there amid the leaves, and mosaic figures looked out from the walls, and here's a work bench packed with jars and miniature saws and grinding wheels and pocketed trays with heaps of tesserae that glowed like gemstones. "This is amazing! This is beautiful!" John said. "And this! And this!" he said, ducking and weaving among the plants and mosaics. "This is wonderful!"

"Thanks," Amy said. "Do you like waffles? Or pancakes? Or eggs? Or cornflakes? Or what?"

"The tables you took to the flea market — " he began.

"Were really amateurish," Amy said. "I made them when I was still a student at Contemporary Arts — a school you never heard of — and I was keeping them for sentimental reasons. But I've run out of space."

"Pancakes would be nice," said John.

They ate in the kitchen. John set the table, sliced a cantaloupe and read newspaper bulletins to Amy while she whipped the batter and poured it onto the griddle. Over the pancakes he asked her why she hadn't told him she was an artist.

"Full-time waitress, part-time artist," she explained. "I've had a few shows in some Bay Area galleries and a couple down in Santa Cruz. I love what I'm doing, I just wish I could do it all the time."

They talked through brunch, talked while Amy washed the dishes and John wiped them, talked and talked and suddenly decided to drive off

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in Amy's car, drive anywhere, and while they drove John told her about his dissertation, about the equations he had concocted from a gedanken experiment. "What's a gedanken experiment?" she asked him.

"It's where you just think an experiment, but you don't actually do it, you just think it through," he told her. "But now I'm beginning to wonder if the equations have anything at all to do with reality, real physical reality."

And after they had parked the car and were walking among the redwood trees, Amy told him, "I began as a painter and I still like painting, other people's paintings, but for me — you'll think I'm crazy — for me paint is too soft and squishy, too abstract. What I like about mosaic tesserae, the little pieces, whether they're glass or ceramic or beach pebbles or whatever, what I like is that I can hold the color in my hand. It's a piece of color. It has shape and size and weight. I love that. I love the idea of a solid piece of color. I know it sounds crazy."

"It doesn't sound crazy to me," John said.

What sounded crazy to John came later, after they had driven all over the place and it was getting late — Amy had to waitress at the Capri and John had to get to his dissertation — and they had arrived back at their stucco apartment house. "You remember the Schrödinger wave equations we talked about?" said Amy. "Remember how we decided that by looking into those equations you could find out who the woman was that Schrödinger made love to and that she — "

John interrupted, saying, "Not me. I mean, I couldn't figure that out, couldn't find out — "

"She had a child nine months after that and Schrödinger was the father," Amy continued.

"That's in the book? In the biography?" He was quite surprised.

"No. But that's what I think. I'm sure of it."

"Ah," John said, drawing it out slowly and, he hoped, thoughtfully. He thanked Amy for brunch and told her he had had a good time, a *really* good time, and Amy said she had had a *really* good time too.

"You said you were hoping I'd drop by. Was it anything in particular?" he asked.

"No. I was just hoping you'd drop by, that's all."

Then Amy went off to work at the Capri and John went off to work on his equations.

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7

John spent more and more of every day working on his equations, neglecting the rest of his life — sometimes even forgetting to eat, which had never happened before. On Friday he didn't remember to drive up to Heidi Egret's until it was already the moment when he should have been walking into her studio. He telephoned her, knowing from experience how irritated she would be at his tardiness, and as her phone rang and rang he phrased and rephrased how he would tell her he was going to be a little late. Her voice on the answering machine said to leave a message. John announced that he was *not* driving up there, was going to spend the weekend on his equations, good-bye. As a matter of fact, he did spend the rest of Friday and all the next day on his thesis, but late on Saturday he phoned Amy and asked did she want to have breakfast or brunch on Sunday. "Of course I do. Knock on my door tomorrow morning and I'll make pancakes," she said.

The next morning John took a long hot shower, sang while he toweled himself dry, stepped into the crisp white cotton trousers which he almost never wore, pulled on a sky blue shirt and trotted downstairs, carrying CDs of Bach, Miles Davis, Olivia Newton-John, Greek folk songs, and a big fresh pineapple, all of which he had bought right after phoning her. He knocked on Amy's door.

"Oh, wow, you look — " John began. Amy was in a blue-and-white striped dress; her hair was swept back and little blue trinkets dangled from her ears. She looked beautiful but also unfamiliar. "I like the way you look," he said.

"You've begun a beard!" she said, rubbing her palms against the stubble on his cheeks. "And I like it," she added.

"What beard?"

John had forgotten to shave for the past five days. As he told Amy while slicing up the pineapple, he had been working steadily and had been forgetting everything else. "I haven't spoken to anyone for a week," he said. He made up for it by talking all through brunch, talking while he washed the dishes and Amy wiped, was talking when they got into his car and drove all over and he didn't fall silent until they stepped barefoot onto the beach at Half Moon Bay to watch the surfers. "I used to know

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somebody who surfed," Amy said, looking away at the blurred horizon, squinting. "He's a real estate agent now, beach front property, and he's rich. I met him at a gallery show last year. He drives a red Alfa Romeo. Maybe you saw it in our parking space."

John said no, he hadn't seen it.

"He got so drunk I didn't dare let him drive back to Berkeley. He fell asleep on the floor," she said, turning to John. "I don't see how you missed his car, a red Alfa Romeo. It was parked out back all night."

"Maybe I was away," John said, looking off down the shoreline. "I used to go away on weekends."

They walked along the beach and swapped stories about everything under the sun. When the sky turned gray they got into his car and headed back home, arriving in Menlo Park as it began to rain. Amy said she had been rereading parts of *Schrödinger: Life and Thought*, especially the part where Schrödinger works out his equations on quantum mechanics. "The woman he was making love to is in those equations," Amy said. "Because this other physicist, Werner Heisenberg, had already figured out how to solve those problems in quantum mechanics. Heisenberg had a way of arranging the numbers into boxes, an array, a big matrix, so that when you work the matrix you get the right answers. Then Schrödinger, our Erwin Schrödinger, created his wave equations and solved the same problems. Schrödinger used a more tactile approach. He was that kind of man, tactile. He called Heisenberg's math repellent and ugly. Everybody calls Schrödinger's equations beautiful."

"Well — " John began.

"It's true, isn't it?"

"The part about Heisenberg and Schrödinger and the equations is true, but about the woman — "

They had turned the corner into the flooded parking area in back of the apartment house and come to a stop. The rain was beating on the car, streaming down the windshield.

"Yes, she had Schrödinger's baby, a girl. And that girl grew up and had a daughter. And that daughter — "

"Wow! How did you arrive at that?"

She laughed. "I've been doing what you might call a gedanken experiment. I've just been thinking things through."

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John had turned to Amy and now he put his hand tentatively, gently to her cheek, his fingers moving into her hair. "I've been thinking too," he told her hesitantly. "About other things. Us."

"Good. Schrödinger loved the things of this world, women especially," Amy said. She was slightly flushed and her speech was beginning to race a bit. "He liked to see things and touch them, smell them, taste them. He was that kind of man. But there are a lot of other people like Heisenberg who don't care about the physical side of things. They think the world is really, finally, when you get right down to it, an abstraction." She turned her face to meet John's kiss, and afterward said, "Heisenberg thought the world could be reduced to a box full of numbers. In those days everybody was taking sides about this."

"I hope we're on the same side," he said, his hand moving beneath her arm.

"God, yes," she said, sliding her arm around his neck. "There was this other physicist, Max Born, who argued with Schrödinger, said the wave functions were only — Oh, God," she said, speeding up. "Probabilities of what might be there, said you could never picture what was actually going on," she finished in a rush.

"I'm going crazy, Amy."

"Me too."

The windows were getting foggy and it was cramped and uncomfortable in the car, so they dashed through the rain to the house.

8

Amy was right about Schrödinger's equations and Heisenberg's matrix. Schrödinger himself wrote a paper (1926, *Annalen der Physik* 79,734-56) about the relationship between his wave equations and Heisenberg's matrix, showing that they produced the same results. But he believed theories should be visualizable *(Anschaulichkeit)* and he loathed Heisenberg's quantum mechanics. In 1926, a few days after Schrödinger had published his fourth and final paper on wave mechanics, Max Born published a paper asserting the statistical nature of Schrödinger's waves — the waves, he said, were unimaginable clouds of probabilities. Of course, Schrödinger rejected that idea. For Erwin Schrödinger, everything

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he knew and loved was graspable in this world, our world of space and time, our living world, as he demonstrated during his years in Ireland.

As for John's thesis, it consisted of three papers on gravity, of which the first two were complete. In the third paper he had arrived at a bothersome equation or, as his dissertation director pointed out, many bothersome equations, and he was having a hard time figuring out what the equations implied. Unlike the European physicists of 1926, John had not read much in the way of philosophy and had not speculated on the relationship of mathematics to the physical world that it might, or might not, represent. Now all sorts of questions distracted and fascinated him, and though they were old questions to Schrödinger and Born, they were new to John Artopoulos. Indeed, these questions appeared to be at the opaque heart of his dissertation and they seemed unanswerable. To put it another way, in the previous six months he used up three reams of paper and hadn't completed a single page. Of course, the past two weeks had been different because now his brain, his body, everything was on fire.

9

We don't know the details of what they did, Erwin Schrödinger and the woman he was with, during winter of 1925-26. The important thing is that he came out from that snow-covered chalet with his wave equations. And we shouldn't pry into what John and Amy did after they had dashed through the downpour and into her flat. John probably spent most of his waking hours on his equations, some of his time with Amy, and a couple of hours playing handball with his colleague Gino. As for Amy, most likely she waitressed at the Capri and spent her free time on a new mosaic. What's important is that on Sunday, April 18, 2004, Amy stepped out of a hot shower, wrapped herself in a towel and — *Hey!* — there stood John in the open doorway, wisps of the steam cloud floating away to reveal a bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses in the other. "I finished it!" he announced.

"Wonderful! Fantastic!" said Amy.

In the kitchen John set to work uncorking the bottle while Amy toweled her hair. Then they sat at the table and he poured a glass for her, a glass for himself. "Greek wine," he told her, smiling. He was more

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unshaven than ever, his eyes puffy and red-rimmed from lack of sleep, but he was happy. "Greeks have been producing wine for thousands of years," he said, lifting his glass.

"Producing mathematicians and physicists, too," Amy said, smiling a little, touching her glass to his. They drank.

They talked about this and that, trivial things like John's having enough time now to get his car radio fixed. Actually, Amy wasn't paying attention to the conversation because up to now she had been able to avoid thinking about where John might disappear to when he had finished his graduate studies. Now she was thinking about it. John asked her how her new mosaic was coming along. Amy said she'd show him later. He said it felt good to be through being a student and that it would feel even better to go to a real job someplace. Amy felt her heart contract at the thought of his leaving. She hesitated a long moment. "Now what do you do?" she asked him.

"I take a shower. Like you," he said, standing up, laughing. "A long, hot shower." He pulled off his T-shirt and padded barefoot down the hall toward the bathroom, tossing his shirt in the air, catching it, singing. By the time John returned to the kitchen Amy had pulled on her cutoffs and a frayed jersey that said XANADU, and was refilling their glasses. John lifted his glass to hers, saying, "Tell me about Schrödinger's woman and show me your new mosaic."

"I'll show you the mosaic," Amy said, touching her glass to his.

"What about the anonymous woman and her daughter and so on?"

"I'm sorry I ever said anything," Amy told him. She hurriedly drained her glass and nearly choked, then coughed. "Now you think I'm crazy or silly or just strange." She coughed again, wiped her eyes and looked at John hopelessly.

"Tell me anyway," he said. "Please."

"I calculated that Erwin's woman gave birth to a baby girl on September 9, 1926. I figure that about twenty-five years later this daughter gave birth to a daughter, too, probably in England. That would be Erwin's granddaughter, like Olivia Newton-John is Max Born's granddaughter, also born in England."

"Olivia Newton-John, the singer? She's Max Born's granddaughter?"

"I thought everybody knew that."

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"Please go on," said John.

"That woman, the granddaughter, probably gave birth about twenty-five years later to a daughter, probably here in the United States," she said, fearing that every word would drive him away.

"In California?"

"In California, yes," she said firmly. "Probably."

"And you are?"

Amy laughed. "Amy Bellacqua, daughter of Vincent and Catherine Bellacqua, who is the daughter of Cosima Ferraro from Morano, Italy, and no relation to Erwin Schrödinger."

"How would we know if we found Schrödinger's great-granddaughter amid all these probabilities?"

"She'd be twenty-eight years old and have the Schrödinger equation tattooed on her butt," she said briskly. "Now let me show you the mosaic."

They went into the front room, the one John loved to linger in, the air full of green leaves and tendrils, the floor carpeted with trays of moss, uncurling ferns, pale celery-colored sprouts, the mosaic tables bearing potted plants, the pots themselves composed of shards from broken mosaics, the walls blazing with mosaic designs. "Here," she said, handing him a tray-like tablet where a dark background had imbedded in it a formula in white stones, like chalk on a blackboard. It was one of Schrödinger's wave equations. "I copied it from *Schrödinger: Life and Thought*. I chose one I liked the shape of. As a kid I used to look at the symbols in my dad's math books. I loved the sigmas, the deltas, the stately integration signs," she told him.

John gazed at the equation, murmuring "Yes," and "Yes," and "Yes," all the while frowning. "But this first big symbol," he said at last. "The wave function."

"The Greek letter *psi*," said Amy. "What's wrong with it?"

"You've made it look like — it looks like — "

"Like a pitchfork, or a trident like the old man of the sea carries. It's *psi*, but I made the tail a bit longer. It's more elegant," she said.

"What are the chances that Schrödinger's unknown great-granddaughter has it tattooed on her shoulder?" he asked.

* * *

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10

The third part of John's dissertation was published by the American Physical Society (2004, *Phys. Rev. Lett.* 09,18 65-88) and was cited with sufficient frequency to be included in an online list of most important papers. Amy's mosaics were exhibited by the Stern–Whitehall gallery in San Francisco, a show that was favorably reviewed in *California Spectrum*. Fred Marsh, hitherto unnamed, who drove the red Alfa Romeo sports car and who was already rich at thirty-five (beach front property), was introduced to Heidi Egret at a gallery reception in Berkeley and two weeks later they were living together at his place.

The tattoo on Heidi's shoulder did — and still does — look like the Greek letter psi, ψ, the symbol for the wave function in Schrödinger's equations. The tattoo also looks like a pitchfork and like Poseidon's trident because, in fact, they all look alike. So much for the tattoo. As for Heidi's great-grandmother and whether she was the woman who spent fifteen or twenty days with Schrödinger in that snow-covered chalet, that's far less clear. It's as if nature had rigged the game so that the more precisely we get to know one part, the tattoo, the less certain we will be about the other, the great-grandmother. Indeed, in 1927 Heisenberg published a paper (*Zeitschrift für Physik* 43 172-198) neatly defining this problem which has since become known as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.

We know all we need to know about the tattoo. "It means I'm a follower of Neptune, you know, the sea god," Heidi explained. "I used to do a lot of surfing — Wadell Creek, Santa Cruz, places like that."

They were sitting in a café in Berkeley — Heidi and Fred and John and Amy. It was a clear sunny day and the view over the Bay was spectacular.

"Does your mother have a tattoo like that?" John asked her.

"I don't remember any," Heidi said. Her mother had died when Heidi was eight. Heidi's father later remarried but was killed in a foggy car crash on California Route 101 when Heidi was fourteen. She was brought up by her stepmother, with whom she became quite close, but when Heidi was seventeen her stepmother married again and Heidi ran off to a life on the beach, surfing. That's when she got the tattoo. "In Santa Clara," she added.

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"I learn something new about her every day," Fred said, smiling. He was wearing a silk jersey and a large expensive wristwatch and had his arm on the back of her chair.

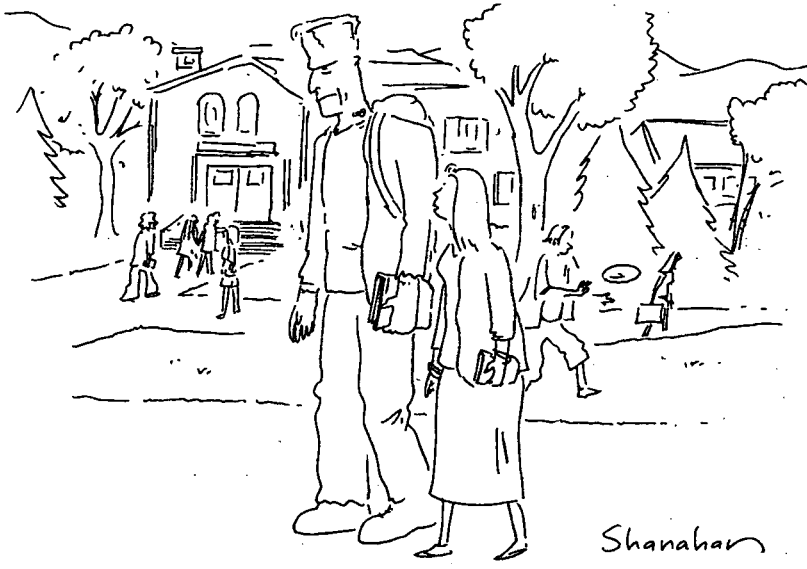
"So it's just a tattoo of Neptune's trident," said Amy. "That's all?"

"And a good luck charm," Heidi told her. "It was engraved on a silver pendant that my grandmother gave me, my mother's mother, but I lost it."

"It won't get lost now," Fred said, patting her shoulder.

The grandmother had come from Ireland to spend a year with Heidi and her father right after Heidi's mother died. "And before she went back she gave me the pendant, her mother's, I think," Heidi said. "She's buried someplace in Ireland. I don't know where."

Amy Bellacqua and John Artopoulos married on September 18, 2004. Amy has been able to cut down on her waitressing and now works almost full time on her mosaics, and John works as a post-doc. The probabilities suggest they're living somewhere near Fermi Lab, around Batavia, Illinois. Or maybe they're living in Cambridge and he's working with Arkani-Hamed at Harvard. But Amy and John are together, that's certain.



"So pre-med was, like, your dad's idea?"

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Houghton has also made an aluminum sphere with a Furloy core, so it has a considerable mass but weighs only a few ounces. When Peter drops the sphere, it bounces higher — and harder, and faster — with each successive bounce. When the bouncing sphere demolishes Houghton's house and lab, Peter vows to use the six remaining Furloy balls to make enough money to repair the damage. But if a Furloy ball is unleashed outdoors, it will fall into the sky.

Eventually Peter and Houghton triumph, performing the Indian Rope Trick and other antigravity feats. But they run afoul of a limping stranger who rejoices in the name Llewellyn Pierpont Boopfaddle...and his henchman, the professional wrestler Lord Ivan Big Bulk.

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—F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

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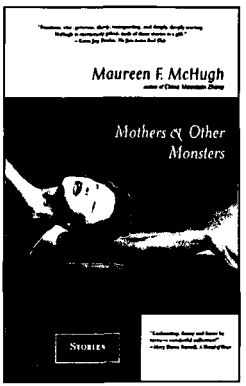
Maureen F. McHugh



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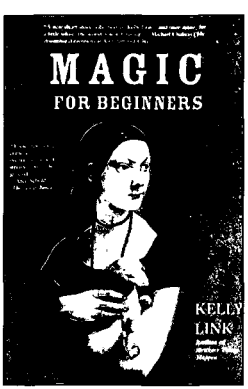

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